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Vol. XIV.

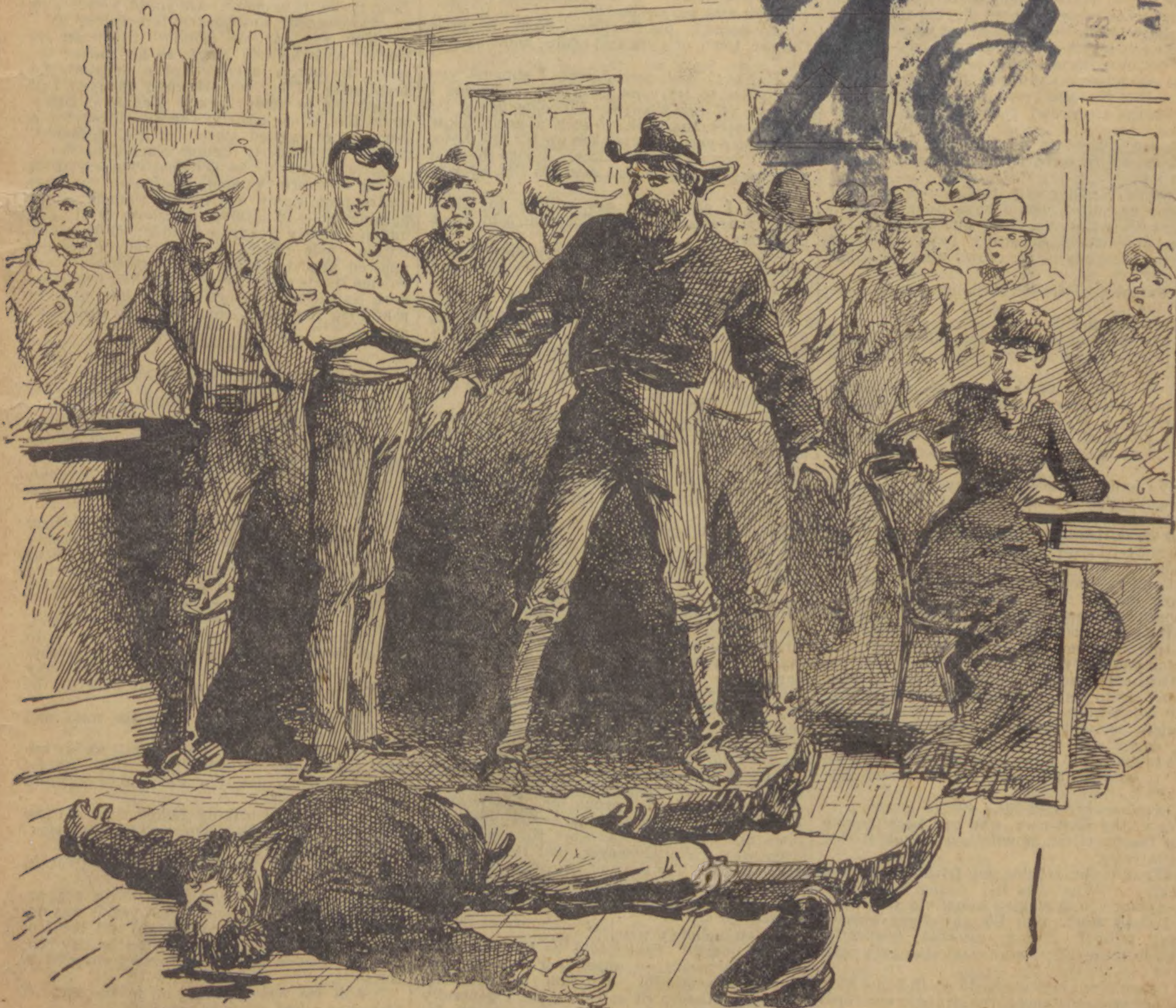
Single
Number.PUBLISHED WEEKLY BY BEADLE AND ADAMS,
No. 98 WILLIAM STREET, NEW YORK.Price,
5 Cents.

No. 338

First-Class Fred, THE GENT FROM GOPHER.

BY EDWARD L. WHEELER.

AUTHOR OF "DEADWOOD DICK" NOVELS, "ROSEBUD ROB" NOVELS, "DENVER DOLL" NOVELS, ETC., ETC.



"THE DEADLY DROP!" BIJE BUZZARD CRIED, STAGGERING BACK

LINCOLN BOOK STORE
107 THIRD AVE. Bklyn. N.Y.

First-Class Fred,

THE GENT FROM GOPHER;

OR,

The Deadly Drop of Brimstone Bar.

BY EDWARD L. WHEELER,
AUTHOR OF "DEADWOOD DICK" NOVELS,
"ROSEBUD ROB" NOVELS, ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

"I WILL DIE FIRST!"

"I WILL die first!"
It was a dramatic scene in which figured the speaker.

The locale was Brimstone Bar, a young mining-camp of Idaho, and the scene was within the chief place of resort in the camp, known as the Eldorado.

The saloon consisted of one large room, and was equally a drinking place, dance-hall and gaming den, rudely furnished, and in all respects characteristic of the tastes and wants of the new "burg," and its inhabitants.

A group of men stood near a table, and each man clutched a cocked six-shooter, while each rough, sun-burnt, bewhiskered face, bore an expression of undoubted determination.

At the table two persons were seated. One was a man of some four-and-twenty years, whose whole appearance indicated the "Eastern-er," or in Western vernacular, a "tender-foot."

The person seated opposite him, and with whom he had evidently been playing cards, was a young woman, whose age might be guessed to be between eighteen and twenty years—at any rate, not over the latter age.

She was possessed of a trim figure and pretty face. Her features were finely chiseled, her complexion clear, and eyes and hair of jetty black.

She was attired in a plain, but neat-fitting black dress, and wore no ornaments or jewelry whatever.

Any one familiar with this woman sport of the mining-camps, would have been surprised to find so modest a looking girl as she at the table, and would naturally have wondered why the weapons of the crowd were leveled at her.

It was she, who, with flashing eyes, had uttered the words:

"I will die first!"

Before her, on the table, lay a pile of bills and gold pieces, which she had evidently won from the Eastern man.

"Yes, I'll die first!" she repeated, in a tone of defiance, as the stern-visaged miners exchanged glances.

"If you think you can scare me you are mistaken, and the sooner you find it out the better."

"We hain't come here to try ter skeer ye!" the spokesman of the party declared, "but we've come on bizness, an' that aire bizness has got to be settled to night. You know somethin' we want ter know, Goldie Glenn, an' you've got to tell us!"

"I will tell you nothing!" the girl cried, her temper rising. "I came here, Jack Homer, to attend to my own business, and have done so, and intend to continue doing so. I know nothing that concerns you to know, and therefore can tell you nothing."

"Git out!" Homer retorted contemptuously. "Don't try to pull no wool over my eyes, Goldie, for it won't work. We aire men, we aire, and it's ag'in' our will ter do ye any harm, ef ye do ther' squar' deal by us, but we hev got our p'int to make, an' we're goin' to make it ef we have to bu'st Brimstun' Bar all ter blazes. Eh, boys?"

The miners growled out a sort of assent. The young Easterner, who had been playing with Goldie Glenn, now looked up at Homer meditatively.

"What is the trouble, my friend?" he asked quickly. "What has the young lady done, to warrant you in making so hefty a threat?"

"I don't know that it's any o'yer bizness, young feller!" Homer retorted, insolently. "Spect like enuff ye wanter take the gal's part, hey?"

"I should not hesitate to do so if I saw fit to lend her any assistance!" the stranger answered with quiet firmness, that caused the miners to again exchange glances.

"That's because ye'r' a darned fool!" Homer

cried, admonishingly. "I see ye'r' a fresh mackerel, as ain't enter ther life in the West, or I'd not be long in soakin' ye one fer yer smartness. Guess mebbe ye don't know that you're tarryin' in the toughest o' the tough towns in Idaho!"

"If you are a specimen of the population, I should say I might safely infer something of the sort!" the stranger smiled, blandly, at which Homer looked both savage, pleased and puzzled.

"See heer!" he cried, taking a step forward, as if tempted to annihilate the Easterner on the spot; "did ye mean thet aire as a compliment or a slur?"

"Oh, as a compliment, without a doubt," was the dry retort. "You look like a thoroughbred!"

"I am a thoroughbred, you bet!" Homer roared, executing an impromptu leap into the air. "I'm a screamer, I am, from way up Yreka Gulch. I kin out fight, out-talk, out-run or out-wrestle ary man as ever sot fut in this hyer town o' Brimstun' Bar!"

"You may be all right in thinking so, my friend, but in one of your specialties I am seriously afraid you overrate your prowess!"

Homer pricked up his ears, so to speak, in an instant.

"Oho! is that so?" he ejaculated. "An' which one is that?"

"Wrestling, sir. You may be ahead of the field as a slugger, as a talker, runner or jumper, but I've an idea I could throw you."

"You throw me?" and Homer burst into a boisterous guffaw, while his comrades and the other bystanders looked amused.

"Yes, I can throw you!" the Easterner repeated pleasantly; "that is, I think I can."

"Who aire ye, anyhow?"

"My name is Joe Chapman, from the little Eastern town of pork and beans, know as Boston."

"Ha! ha! Wal, now, Joseph, I suppose you are content to let your joke drop, providing I give ye off this time; for I'll be darned ef I'd like to break the back of sech a good-lookin' greeny like you. Jest set 'em up for the boys, an' we'll excuse you this time. A joke the likes o' yourn generally costs a man his life, hyer in camp!"

"Ah! I see. You are willing to admit that you are no wrestler?" Chapman said, good-naturedly.

"Me? Why, man alive, thar's nothin' west o' the Miss'ssip' w'ot kin throw one side o' me!"

"For how much?"

"Hey? D'ye want to bet?"

"I am willing to believe that I can floor you, and am equally willing to back my presumption with what little money I have with me!"

"For how much?"

"A thousand dollars."

"Kerwhoop! Ye darned fool, I'll jest hev to go ye on thet aire. Git up an' yank yer shirt off, an' I'll break yer ribs an' toss ye over ther moon."

"Very well! All hands step up to the bar and drink at my expense, then we'll perfect arrangements."

The crowd hastened to obey, and Chapman got a chance to speak to Goldie Glenn, who was regarding him keenly as she toyed with the cards.

"I have given you a chance to escape these fellows, although I know not what they have against you," he said. "You are an utter stranger to me, and have a cool thousand of my money, but I would not see you come to harm."

"Thank you," she said, quietly. "I see that you are a gentleman, and I respect you accordingly. But there is no need of their trying to scare me, for I am not afraid of them. Bah! no, they dare not harm me!"

"I fear you are imprudent. They are a lawless set, and are in dead earnest."

"It is you, who are wrong, sir. I know them better than you, and again assure you they dare not harm me. Another time, you may learn why. You, however, had best look out for yourself. The town of Brimstone Bar is indeed a rough place, and its inhabitants are not one of them to be trusted, especially by a stranger."

"You include yourself?"

"Of course! That would be but fair, for I am by no means an angel, nor will you find any of the angelic persuasion in the camp. When gentlemen sit at this table, I generally make it a point to warn them to look out for themselves. I believe, however, I neglected to warn you."

"It would seem so!" Chapman said, arising, with a shrug of his shoulders. "I thought myself fairly lucky with the pasteboards, but the absence of the weight of a thousand dollars in my pocket, convinces me that I have no chance with you!"

"You cannot blame me. You insisted on playing, when you saw luck was against you!"

"Oh! certainly, I do not blame you. A reckless indifference as to whether I lost, or won, blended with the fact that I rather enjoyed watching you, as you played, was what caused me to tarry at your table. Excuse me, now, pray, until I see what I can do for Mr. Homer. Or, will you drink with me?"

"Not now. Were I seen to drink anything, here, it would but give the crowd a chance to press me to do the same, with them, a refusal of which would cause trouble. Are you not fearful that you have undertaken a rather difficult job?"

"Not in the least. I will play with the fool, awhile, and then, when his conceit and ambition get fully aroused, I'll dump him."

"Do so. I will gamble on you, expecting of course that you will try to win the money for me, since I see that I have made an impression upon you."

"You are rather previous, are you not—or have I unwittingly made a confession, of anything so serious?"

"Oh! no. But, you see, I can read men, even as I can read cards. I warned you, awhile ago that I am a dangerous person, and hope you will remember it. For, you see, were you to get spooney I should have to tell you then, as now, that I wouldn't have the best man living, if every hair in his head was hung with diamonds. I hate men, except for what money I can fleece them out of. Go ahead, now! You are forewarned, consequently forearmed!"

"You are at least candid!" Chapman returned, with an odd laugh, as he walked toward the bar, wondering not a little at the peculiarity of her remarks, and at what had caused her to abide in such a camp as Brimstone Bar, when, clearly, she was fitted for a much more exalted station in life, if, indeed, she had not formerly occupied such a station.

Little versed in the personal characteristics of far Western women, Chapman was not aware that many a virtuous woman sat at gaming-tables of mining-towns, outwardly gay and apparently free from trouble; while locked within their hearts, some secret or sorrow gnawed and throbbed, until at times those women sports could have ended their own lives with as little compunction, as they used in raking in the miner's hard won and easily lost money.

CHAPTER II.

THE DEADLY DROP.

THE crowd had already disposed of the drinks when Chapman reached the bar, which was at the further side of the room.

Jack Homer had also thrown off his coat, shirt and boots, and stood among a throng of excited admirers.

Homer stood five feet ten inches, in his bare feet, and weighed about a hundred and eighty pounds, with scarcely a pound of superfluous flesh upon his brawny frame. He indeed looked a Hercules, as he stood in waiting, apparently nothing but sinew and bone.

In face, there was little about him to attract, for his features were coarse and marked with numerous scars. His mouth, large and of sensual expression, was shaded by a heavy, inky mustache, and his eyes and hair were of the same hue.

"Ruffian" was stamped upon the man, and could not well be erased.

Joe Chapman was not quite so tall as his adversary, and did not look so ponderous of frame; nevertheless, he plainly was a man of no mean muscular prowess.

He was a good-looking fellow, with a carelessly-reposed sort of countenance, a pleasant mouth, brown eyes, and a well-shaped head.

His hair and beard were light-brown in color.

In citizen garb, he had little of the appearance of being a dangerous man, yet it was noticeable that Jack Homer, blatant and boastful as he was, did not manifest so much noisy confidence when he saw his adversary stripped to the shirt.

"Will we wrestle here, or in the street?" Chapman asked, when he was ready.

"Here, of course!" Homer replied, sneeringly—"as it is hardly worth while to take the

trouble to walk to the street. I calculate to kill you in one fall."

"You do, eh?" Joe replied. "Well, that is your privilege, if you can do it. Put up your stakes with the proprietor of this place, and I will do likewise, and then we will amuse each other."

The money was promptly put up.

There was vigorous betting among the crowd that now swarmed within the Eldorado, for each athlete had his admirers, who were ready to risk winning or losing money on the result.

Goldie Glenn, the mysterious girl gambler, also entered into the spirit of the occasion, and wagered various sums of money that Chapman would be the victor.

The match was to be catch-as-catch-can, best three out of five falls, and when a suitable ring had been secured in the center of the saloon, the two men stepped into it, ready for business.

For a moment they eyed each other keenly. Then, all of a sudden, they rushed forward and clinched.

It was then that Homer's superior size became more noticeable, and Chapman's backers began to feel a little doubtful of their choice.

At the end of ten minutes, however, when neither man had gained a point, their enthusiasm increased.

At the end of twenty minutes it was plain to be seen that Chapman had taken the aggressive and was giving his man a hard job to defend himself.

The iron of the two men then gradually began to manifest itself. Homer was beginning to perspire freely, while Chapman had not sweat a hair.

Ah!

The crowd suddenly gave a yell as the Boston boy caught his adversary at an unguarded moment, raised him bodily in the air, and hurled him to the floor, entirely breaking his hold and scoring a fall.

Amid the confusion that followed Homer lay quietly where he had fallen, catching his breath, which had been pretty nearly knocked out of him.

He finally arose, with a bitter oath, and the two men rushed at each other again.

This time the struggle was inaugurated with a vengeance.

It took but five minutes, however, for Chapman to score another fall on his antagonist, which brought him hearty applause.

"Ye'd better giv it up as a bad job, Jack," a sympathizing miner advised. "Ther galoot aire too much fer ye!"

"Cuss him, no! I'll break his neck this bout!" the infuriated athlete declared, vehemently. "I'm ther best man an' I'll prove it!"

Once more he rushed at the Bostonian with the aspect of an infuriated tiger, but it was only to be snatched instantly off his feet by his adversary and sent spinning through the air over the heads of the nearest bystanders.

When he struck the floor it was with such force as to render him temporarily unconscious.

"Ther stranger aire entitled to ther stakes," cried the referee, "for he won it fairly."

The announcement elicited a cheer from those who had won money by Chapman's victory; but those who were the losers looked dark and savage, and were not careful in manifesting their disapproval of the stranger.

"It's a danged shame," one fellow asserted, who belonged to Jack Homer's particular set, "ter let an outsider come hyer to Brimstone Bar an' soak in our cash in that style 'thout givin' us his pedigree beforehand."

"On course it is," agreed another. "An' as ther's a remedy fer sech complaints, I propose that we adopt it to suit this hyer circumstance!"

They held a sullen sort of consultation, and then Buzzard, Jack Homer's "right bower," advanced toward the dashing Bostonian, followed by his pals.

"See hyer, me larkie," he said, gruffly, "we don't tumble kindly to this leetle racket o' yourn nobow. You've soaked in a lot o' our stuff an' we want it back, you bet!"

"I've none of your money, sir!" Chapman cried, his eyes flashing, for he saw that there was a disposition on the part of the men to kick up a fuss. "I made my wager with the man whom I vanquished, and have nothing to do with your outside bets."

"Ye hain't hey? Waal, now, we see fit to argy different. You were the cause o' our losin' our hard earnin's, an' you've got ter make us whole. D've hear?"

"If I hear you will be surprised to learn that I do not heed," Chapman returned. "Don't

think you can convert me into a toy for your personal amusement, gentlemen, because you cannot!"

"An' don't think we're a pack o' coyotes as will let a tenderfute soak us nuther," Buzzard growled savagely. "Ef ye want ter know it, we're the Rope an' Limb Boys o' this hyer burg, an' we adjudicates all defickulties, so, ef ye don't want ter git yerself inter a elervated situation you've got ter make us fellers hull, you bet."

"When I do, you'll know it!" Chapman responded, his cheeks flushing. "I did not come here to quarrel with you, gents, but you'll find you cannot impose upon me. If you want your money back, get it of those who won it. The stake I won, I certainly propose to keep, and don't you forget that. So if you have ordinary good sense you'll use it. If you have not, the inevitable results will fall upon yourselves."

"Oho! Ye mean fight, do ye?"

"I shall stand up for my rights, yes, though there were a thousand to one against me!" was the stern reply.

"Waal, ye shall have a tankful of it, cuss ye. I'll give ye jest five minutes ter decide which you'll do—give up the swag or swing. So work yer thinkers, lively!"

"I give you my decision, now!" Chapman answered, quickly. "Neither will I give up the money, nor swing. The one of you who attempts a hostile move, I'll drop, and all others shall follow!"

Buzzard did not reply, but fixed his eyes on the clock, upon the wall.

His comrades stood ready to rush upon the Boston boy, at a moment's notice.

The other occupants of the Eldorado had drawn to one side.

It was evident that they intended to have no hand in the prospective *melee*, but were inclined to let Chapman defend himself.

As for the Bostonian, he stood erect, facing his enemies, his face perfectly at repose, and his eyes stern in their piercing glance.

His arms were folded across his chest, and it was evident that he had no idea of resorting to other weapons of defense than those with which nature had endowed him.

Yet, what could he expect to do thus, when a dozen strong men were pitted against him?

A suggestive silence prevailed, broken only by the regular ticking of the clock.

Chapman partly turned his head, once, to look at Goldie Glenn.

She was seated at the table, and as he looked, he caught a glitter of something in one of her hands, but could not tell what it was.

Their gaze did not meet, however, for she was looking toward the clock.

At last a click warned them that the five minutes was up, as did a movement on the part of Bijie Buzzard.

"Time's up, pilgrim!" he growled. "Do we git the swag, or do we not? Speak up!"

"You do *not*!" Chapman answered, calmly. "But I warn you not to touch me!"

"Oho! Is that so? Boys, when I say 'one, two, three,' d'ye go fer him. First, Jim Hoon, ye git a noosed rope ready. We'll larn Bosting a few things she aren't familiar with."

Hoon started to obey the order, but had taken scarcely half a dozen steps, when he suddenly uttered a piercing yell, threw up his arms, and fell backward to the floor.

Then, a tiny spot of blood was seen oozing from the center of his forehead!

He had been wounded, yet there had been no report, either of rifle or pistol!

"The *Deadly Drop*!" Bijie Buzzard cried, staggering back. "Quick, boys—search the neighborhood!"

With enraged cries, the Rope and Limb Gang rushed from the Eldorado, with drawn weapons, some of the bystanders joining in the stampede.

Jim Hoon lay outstretched upon the floor, motionless and limp—dead.

The bullet had pierced his skull, and lodging in the brain, caused almost instant death.

His countenance expressing his unbounded astonishment, Joe Chapman took advantage of the absence of the Regulators to don the garments he had divested himself of, prior to the wrestling match.

Who was the *Deadly Drop*, and what was the mystery concerning Hoon's tragic fate?

CHAPTER III.

BOOTH BARRON.

THE young town, or, more properly, the young "camp," of Brimstone Bar, was a wild place, "planted" amid rugged surroundings.

The camp was not yet two months old, and there was no prospect that there would ever develop a "city" of importance, for, barring the fact that it was on the line of the popular route to the gold-placers of the Coeur d'Alene mountains, there was nothing to give promise of permanent existence.

But little gold or silver had been discovered in the vicinity; nor was there any reason why so undesirable a site should have been selected for a town—except one, of which we will speak later.

Yet the town was there, nestled down in the heart of a forks-gap, and its surroundings were gigantic mountains with sparsely-timbered sides. In three directions from the Bar branched off deep mountain defiles, through two of which rushed a furious creek, while the third was the route of entry into the Coeur d'Alene hills.

Thirty odd habitations comprised the town—a mixture of mud-buts, shanties and tents, and as for the inhabitants, they were of the typical class indigenous to nearly every mining town—the representatives of many races and many natures.

The Bar had no single main street, as in many other mining towns, but the abodes were built in a circle, facing toward a level plaza, or public ground.

In reality, Brimstone Bar had been located there for the sole purpose of offering a stop-off, for the winter, of such sanguine pilgrims as had started for the Coeur d'Alene hills, and found the terrible mountain snows too much to battle with.

The inhabitants, accordingly, were chiefly adventurers who were waiting for the opening which the Spring suns alone would bring; then would follow the stampede into the now snow-locked gold hills; for, although the snow had already disappeared about Brimstone Bar, few were eager to venture on into the wilderness until some of the more adventurous had gone ahead and broken the way.

On the night of the trouble in the Eldorado saloon, when the full April moon flooded the little town and its rugged surroundings, a girlish figure stood in the doorway of one of the cabins which faced upon the plaza—a *petite* yet strikingly pretty little maiden, who, though her attire was plain, was the personification of all that was sweet and lovely.

Finely chiseled features, a tempting mouth, blue eyes and a wealth of brown hair were hers. Probably not more than seventeen years had passed over her head; but she was a bud that promised to blossom into a glorious womanhood.

The eager, expectant expression upon her face, as it was kissed by the mellow moonlight, proved beyond a doubt that she was awaiting some one's arrival, and to it was added a look of anxiety as the minutes passed and no one came.

The night air was still chill, and few people were upon the plaza; yet she eyed those that were there rather suspiciously.

At length, however, a footstep sounded, and she uttered a glad cry as a man skulked around the corner of the cabin and pushed past her into the interior.

"Oh! Booth! How you did startle me!" she said, following him and closing the door behind her.

The man did not reply, but striking a match, lit the lamp upon the table, and the light revealed a person of striking appearance.

He was tall, and of powerful build, and attired in black, with top-boots, slouch hat and a scarlet-lined cloak. A belt about his waist contained weapons, and his face was hidden behind a full black mask.

A dangerous-looking customer he was to meet on a dark night, in a lonely place; yet the girl appeared to have no fear of him.

"Booth, has anything gone wrong?" she asked, laying her hand on his arm.

"Yes, curse it!" he replied, snappishly. "Has not everything gone wrong? Does it not always go wrong? Where's the old man?"

"Over at the Eldorado, I presume!" and the girl heaved a sigh.

"What is he doing there?" the man demanded.

"I don't know, I am sure, but I fear, Booth, that he is falling into the habit of gambling!"

"Bah! An old igno—"

"Stop, Booth! My father is not an igno ramus. You forget that he is a gentleman of education and intelligence."

"Of course he is, Cherry. I sometimes speak what I don't mean. Your father is so confounded odd sometimes, that I get provoked at

him. Has he said how long he intends to stay in this place?"

"No! But I hear that he has leased this place for a month longer. The week we have stayed here has seemed an age to me."

Booth grated his teeth.

"And to me, too!" he muttered. "Has the old man any suspicion that I am following?"

"None. He does not even suspect that I know anything about you. Oh! Booth, if he did, I don't know what he would do. He would arouse the whole country but what he would find you."

"No need to tell me that, Cherry. I am well aware of it. He has already made me the hunted outcast I am. Do you know if he has gained any tidings of Edna?"

"I think not. If he had, I should certainly know something about it."

Booth Barron, for that was the name he bore, seated himself, with a long-drawn sigh, and buried his face in his hands, and after a silence of several minutes, Cherry went and knelt beside him.

"Oh! Booth, pray do not be so downcast," she said, her voice betraying deep feeling. "Has the experience not been bitter enough that you should still continue to think of her? Do not be despondent. You have yet a long life before you, and there is no dark cloud without its silver lining. Cheer up, Booth—for my sake."

Her tone caused him to remove his hands from before his eyes, and gaze down into her upturned face.

"For your sake, eh?" he articulated, in surprise. "Why—but, sure enough! Why not for *your* sake as much as for any one else's, my little bird? I have not forgotten that you have always been a bright little friend to me, Cherry. Bless you, I dare say you are the only one I have left."

"I am glad you believe me your friend, Booth. You know we were even playmates and—"

"And rustic lovers, as it were—until—until—But, curse it, why recall the past. The die is cast, and so it must remain. I still live, but I live only for vengeance!"

"Oh! don't talk that way, Booth. You should not be so revengeful. It is very wicked."

"Ha! ha! Wicked to be revengeful! You do not know, Cherry. You are not worldly wise, yet. What matters it how wicked I am? Mine is a ruined life, and the hereafter has no bright prospects in store for me. Damnation stares me in the face, and it cannot matter what I do—it will be the same. Do you think the circumstances warrant my being a saint? Do you suppose if you were a murderer, hunted by the bloodhounds of the law, you would feel meek, passive and saintly? Do you suppose, if you had been bitterly wronged by one whom you held dearest on earth, you would not feel revengeful? Bah! do not talk to me! I get furious when I think of the past."

"It is very wrong of you to be thus desperate, Booth. You are out of danger, here, and should be brave and good, and try to atone for the past!"

He arose, with a harsh, impatient laugh, and paced to and fro, across the room.

"Safe?" he said, huskily. "Oh! no; I am safe nowhere. I am no fool, Cherry. Consequently, I keep myself posted. You said your father had no suspicion of my being in this vicinity; but you are wrong. I have learned from good authority that detectives are already *en route* for this place, and no doubt, ere two more sunsets, reward papers will be posted in Brimstone Bar, for my capture. But, curse 'em, I will fight 'em, to the bitter end!"

Cherry heaved a deep sigh.

If Booth Barron did not understand its meaning, she did.

She loved this outcast, with all the strength of her young, innocent nature, but he did not know it; or, if he did know it, he did not appreciate the fact in all its fullness.

It was a singular story, which ran in connection with the two young people's acquaintance.

Jackson Chambers, a year before, had been a prosperous money-lender, in an Eastern town, and was as popular as he had been reputed wealthy.

At the time mentioned, he was a widower.

He had been married, when young, and a son had been the result of that union. His wife, however, died shortly after the birth.

A few years later, a second marriage occurred, and a daughter was the result of this union. The second wife also died, leaving him

much of the wealth that afterward formed the basis of his heavy speculations.

He did not marry again, and his two children grew up together.

When they were aged respectively ten and fourteen years, another member was added to the family in the person of a bright eleven-year-old daughter, of a particular friend of Mr. Chambers, who, having lost his wife, had concluded to try and better his fortunes in the mining country of the far West.

Chambers had kindly consented to become temporary guardian of his friend's child, until such time as Mr. Leeds should return.

Edna Leeds was a beautiful child, of winning disposition, and, as the years passed over her head, advancing her toward a glorious womanhood, she became the object of universal admiration.

Even pretty Cherry Chambers was less a favorite than her companion, although the girls were fast friends, and no rivalry appeared to exist between them.

From the time Edna reached her sixteenth birthday, she was literally besieged by lovers, and, child though she was, had many eligible offers for her hand.

Among the throng of would-be suitors for her hand were Jackson Chambers himself—who appeared anxious to again assume the matrimonial yoke—and his son, Charles.

Father and son now were in business together, but no sooner did it become apparent that they were rivals in love than their feelings toward one another underwent a change, and they often had violent quarrels, which resulted in Charles Chambers's eventually withdrawing from the business.

Pretty Edna also had another suitor, in Booth Barron, the son of respectable parents, and a very handsome and accomplished young gentleman he was; and of all her suitors, Barron was the most favored.

Matters ran on until Edna was past seventeen, without any one having gained the victory; then it became whispered about that Barron would shortly lead Edna to the altar.

The report resulted in several bitter quarrels between the Chamberses, and Barron, in which, however, the latter always seemed to come out best.

The culmination of the matter was a tragedy. Edna Leeds suddenly and mysteriously disappeared, and, on the same evening, Charles Chambers discovered Booth Barron in the act of robbing the village bank, and was shot dead.

Barron was arrested and jailed, and made a confession, stating that he and Edna were to have been married within a week, and not having the requisite funds, necessity had tempted him to burglarize the bank, and borrow a small sum, to see him through his honeymoon.

Self-defense was his alleged cause for shooting young Chambers.

The news of Edna's strange disappearance excited much comment, and it was not until several days had elapsed, that any cause could be assigned for it; then the photograph of a handsome Western frontiersman, was found among the effects she had left behind, and it was generally believed that she had been in correspondence with him, and had fled to the West, to link her fate with him.

In the mean time, after but a few hours imprisonment, Booth Barron had, in some inexplicable manner, effected his escape and was not recaptured.

Believing he had fled in the wake of Edna Leeds, and swearing vengeance for the murder of his son, Jackson Chambers, shortly after the tragedy, closed up his business in the East, and set out for the far West.

In the course of his roaming, accompanied by Cherry, he had come to Brimstone Bar.

Such is a brief outline of the case, and as the reader has seen, Booth Barron was also there, and in communication with Cherry.

"Yes, I am hunted!" he said, glancing at his watch, "but they shall not harm me. I'll outwit them, sharp as they are. All I live for is vengeance on her whom I loved so—she who gave me encouragement, only to prove false to me. Curse her! Curse her!"

"Don't, Booth—don't! She did not, least of all, encourage you to do robbery or murder. I am sorry for you, Booth, but you did very wrong!"

"Maybe I did—but so did she—so did she. My time will come for triumph ere long, however. I'll crush her as I would a worm. But of course you do not like to hear me talk thus, Cherry. You are good and I'm bad. I must be going now. It would not do for the old man

and I to meet. There'd be trouble. Of course he naturally feels tough toward me, but I can't help it. The deed's done, and can't be undone."

He drew Cherry toward him for a moment, and pressed her head against his breast.

"You are a good, true little friend to me, Cherry!" he said in a hoarse, choked voice, "and may God reward you! There, now, I must be off!"

He took a stride toward the door, but stopped short, as there resounded a heavy rap upon the outside.

"Lost!" he gasped, turning to Cherry. "Quick, hide me, or I may have to answer for another murder."

CHAPTER IV.

THE SCHEMERS.

AFTER he had finished donning his clothes, Joe Chapman approached the card-table where Goldie Glenn sat, as unconcerned as if no human life had been taken within the room.

Her face betrayed no emotion, but her eyes were more lustrously beautiful and expressive than before.

She looked up with a bewitching smile as Chapman paused beside the table.

"What! Are you going to try your luck with the pasteboards again?" she pleasantly inquired, her gaze resting so searchingly upon his face, that he felt uneasy.

"Hardly, after what has just happened," he replied, dryly. "Who killed that fellow?"

"Deadly Drop, I suppose. He does all that sort of thing, you know."

"More correctly, I don't know. Who is Deadly Drop?"

"That is more than I, or any one else in this camp, can tell you. He is an unknown, invisible messenger of death, who visits vengeance upon the lawless of this camp."

"Ah! Then this is not the first murder?"

"By no means. Many have fallen since my advent here, in the same manner as yonder ruffian, and the name Deadly Drop has become a terror to evil-doers."

"Indeed! Might I ask, what brings you into such a place, then?"

"It is nobody's business but my own, sir. That's plain, but I mean it."

"I think I could point out the person who killed the man," Chapman said, drumming idly on the table.

"Ah! do you? Who?"

"You!"

"Heavens! You astonish me! Do I look like a person capable of such a crime?"

"You warned me that you were not to be trusted, I believe. Then, too, I saw something glitter in your hand just before the man fell."

"Ha, ha! it was this," and she exposed to view a small revolver. "This would make more noise than the instrument with which Deadly Drop performs his work."

"What were you about to do with it, then, when I detected the glitter of it in your hand?"

"You have no right to question me, sir!"

"But I take the right just as freely. If I were to hint, for other hearing, that my convictions were that you are Deadly Drop, what do you suppose would be the result?"

"Bah! do not think to alarm me. They would not believe you. If you are anxious to know—I had the weapon ready for use, with a view of defending you should the Rope Boys rush upon you in a body."

"Are you sure?"

"Positive!"

"Then, allow me to apologize, and at the same time thank you. Do you think they will capture the assassin?"

"No. Whoever or whatever he is, he is not one to be easily taken. His presence is the sure sign of death, but no man has yet been spry enough to detect him."

Chapman did not immediately answer, but glanced at his watch, and appeared ready to depart.

"Are you off?" Goldie asked, ruffling the cards idly.

"Yes, I think I will turn in for the night; it is already late."

"Indeed? If you call eleven o'clock late, you must be an early bird. Do you propose to tarry long in Brimstone Bar?"

"Until the snow melts in the Cœur d'Alene country, perhaps. That is my objective point."

Then bowing gallantly, he left the Eldorado and its heart-winning queen of the cards.

Brimstone Bar was, for a wonder, not the happy owner of a palatial hostelry; consequently those who were not permanently located had

to abide with such accommodations as they could get.

Chapman, however, was not unprovided for, since he made his way to the little tent at the southern side of the plaza and entered without ceremony.

The interior was but scantily furnished, and dimly lighted by a smoking lantern suspended from the ridge pole.

A man was seated upon a three-legged stool, in an attitude of waiting. He was commonly attired, and wore a long well kept beard. His appearance, as a whole, was rather prepossessing and he looked to be a person of about five and forty years.

His countenance lighted up with expectancy Chapman entered, and he relit his pipe, as if anticipating news.

The wrestler threw himself upon an apology of a bed, of blankets, in a half reclining position, and lit a cigar.

"Well?" the man on the stool said, interrogatively. "Did you see her?"

"Yes, and had a chat with her, too."

"What did you make out?"

"Nothing. She attends emphatically to her own business, and don't permit any one to mind it for her."

"Did you put the inquiries I suggested?"

"Some of them, sir, but got no satisfactory answer."

"She assigned no cause for being here, in so strange a situation?"

"None, in particular. In fact, Mr. Chambers, I am satisfied she is not the one you seek."

"Bah! I am no fool. I'd know the girl were I to meet her a hundred years hence, much less a year."

"But, sir, faces often deceive one. I have studied the girl. I am satisfied she is not the one."

"Give me your reasons."

"Well, in the first place, the card queen is in my estimation, an A 1 adventuress. She is sharper than a steel-trap, and has evidently been schooled by experience for the position she now occupies. She handles the pasteboards with marvelous skill, and is, in more senses than one, a woman of the world. She warned me to trust no one in this camp, not even herself, admitting that she was a dangerous character. I've not a doubt but what she'd skin a man of his boodle, without a solitary pang of compunction."

"Indeed! Did she skin you?"

"She raked in the better share of my cash, at cards."

Jackson Chambers frowned.

"I had no idea that a man of your stamp would be thus taken in," he growled.

"Neither had I!" Chapman frankly acknowledged, "but she did. From what dealings I have had with the tender sex, I should decide that the one who picks this girl up for a fool will be sadly mistaken."

Jackson Chambers was silent for several minutes, during which time his gaze fell upon the ground, and his face was the scene of changing expressions.

"Chapman," he said, finally, "you were recommended to me as a shrewd detective, and I place every confidence in you as such—otherwise, I would not employ you. I have already given you one cause for my following the girl—my love for her. I am satisfied beyond a doubt that the girl at the Eldorado is Edna Leeds. I am so positive of it that I would risk ten thousand dollars on it."

"And lose. She would swear she was some one else, and whack-up with the man who bet you. But go on."

"Believing as I do, and trusting that I can be confidential with you, I have something to communicate which will give you even more work."

"Go ahead, sir. You have my attention."

"Well, you see, when this girl fled from my home, in the East, it was a matter of surprise to every one except myself."

"Ah?"

"Yes. It was a matter of wonder to everybody but me."

"And why not to you?"

"I will explain. You see, I loved the girl devotedly, as I have told you, and as she had several suitors, there was naturally a spirited rivalry and a deal of jealousy among the rivals. Resolved not to be thwarted, I adopted tactics, which, if not exactly honorable, were fair in the war of love."

"What?"

"Well, you see, as all the family mail came into my possession first, I found it convenient to examine the letters addressed to my protégée."

It was, in fact, my duty to do this, as the child was young and much in need of a governing hand."

"Rather a questionable proceeding on your part, I should say."

"You may think so; I do not. Well, as a result, I finally became the recipient of a communication from a Western correspondent, who wrote the girl that, upon hearing from her, he had most important news to send her."

"Ah!"

"Yes. My curiosity was aroused, for I at once suspected that my old friend, Leeds, had died and left behind a goodly fortune. Hoping to learn more, I allowed the letter to pass into the girl's possession, and bided my time. But no more letters from that source came to her. This satisfied me that she suspected me of tampering with her mail, and had changed her address. When she suddenly decamped, therefore, I became satisfied that she had gone West to meet her correspondent, and that, too, in regard to property matters. So I followed in pursuit."

"Who was the man with whom she corresponded?"

"He signed himself 'First-Class Fred,' from which I infer that he is one of the sporting characters peculiar to this country."

Chapman started a trifle.

"Very likely. Well, now, what else?" he said.

"This. I feel positive that the girl has inherited a fortune, even if she has not come into possession of it. I mean to have both her and the fortune. Do you see? It will be your work to ferret out the case, in all its points, and keep me posted. Once I find that the card queen at the Eldorado is Edna Leeds beyond the shadow of a doubt, I can easily force her to marry me. Then, all will be well, and you will be liberally rewarded."

"How liberally?"

"That shall be for you to say."

"Very well. I presume you will lie low?"

"Yes, or if I move about, it will be in disguise. I have not been to the Eldorado since I discovered the girl there, and then she did not see me."

"It is well. For her to know of your presence here would spoil all. I will work up your case, and if you do not see me again you may be assured that I am not far off."

And as the wrestler threw away his cigar, and stretched himself out on the blankets, Jackson Chambers took the hint that the interview was at an end, and arose and stalked from the tent.

CHAPTER V.

FIRST CLASS FRED.

THE knock upon the door of the cabin, occupied as the temporary home of the Chamberses, was peremptory, and caused both Cherry and Booth Barron to visibly pale.

"It's not father!" the girl whispered; "it is not his knock. Quick, hide here!"

At one side of the room was a table, the cloth of which reached to the floor.

Without delay, Barron crawled under it, and was thus concealed from view.

Cherry awaited until there came another rap, then called out:

"Who is there?"

"A visitor. Open the door!" was the answer, in a pleasant voice, which, however, did not sound familiar to the trembling girl.

"Your answer is not satisfactory. I must first know who you are," she called out.

"Oh! well, I am called First-Class Fred. I wish to see your father, on business."

"My father is not home, yet, sir."

"Not? Oh! well, with your permission, I will come in, and wait for him."

Cherry hesitated, not knowing what to do.

If it should, indeed, be an acquaintance of her father's, and she should refuse him admission, she had no doubt but what her parent would be very angry; and if it should turn out to be some designing villain, was Booth Barron not present, to protect her?

At this thought, she stepped forward, unbarred the door, and opened it.

Before her stood a man of commanding figure, and prepossessing appearance. His attire, of faultless cut, was of rich brown cloth; he wore a broad-rim felt and patent-leather knee boots; a huge diamond sparkled in his white shirt front, while a ponderous gold chain was looped from pocket to pocket, across his vest.

In face he was what many would call a handsome man, for his features were full, round, and good-natured of expression, and his eyes

keen, brilliant and magnetic. His hair was of a decided blonde tint, and worn in a flossy profusion down over his shoulders, and his mustache, a shade darker, was well trained and luxuriant.

Plainly, too, he was a man of no mean muscular power and physical endurance, and was one to attract attention in any throng.

His appearance struck Cherry so forcibly, at a glance, that she stood staring point-blank at him, for a moment; then, recollecting herself, she stepped to one side.

"If you are a friend of my father's, sir, you are welcome to come in—although I do not know as I am doing right in admitting a total stranger."

"You need have no compunctions about admitting me, I assure you, dear young lady. I have some business to transact with your father, and I dare say he will soon arrive."

"It is past time for him, already. Pray be seated, sir!" and, closing the door, Cherry placed him a stool where he would not command a ready view of the table, under which Booth Barron was cowering.

First-Class Fred seated himself, and opened a pleasant chat, proving himself not only an interesting conversationalist but a man of superior education; and, though the free and easy style of the frontier was to be detected in his words and ways, all was devoid of coarseness or vulgarity.

Ere ten minutes had passed, Cherry found herself more interested in him than she would have cared to confess.

His address was such as men would be bound to respect, and women admire.

"You are a stranger here, are you not?" Cherry asked.

"Well, not exactly—that is, I am familiar with the vicinity, although few, here, know me, if any. I am a sort of ranger—omnipresent, you know—liable to turn up at 'most any place, at any time."

"Indeed? And such a funny name you have—so odd!"

"Yet, suiting my personal tastes. I like everything to move off first-class, you see. I argue that there are but few reasons why a person should not live and be first-class instead of dropping to a lower level. A man with honor and integrity need not necessarily go down hill if he has a cent's worth of ambition and perseverance in him. I always make it a rule to surmount difficulties and come out first-class, on top of the heap, so to speak."

There was a rap upon the door just then and Cherry arose.

"That's papa now," she said. "I know his knock."

She opened the door with alacrity and admitted Jackson Chambers, about whose step there was a trifling unsteadiness, that might have caused a close observer to suspect he had been drinking.

"Papa, here is a gentleman who called to see you on business. Sir, this is my father," Cherry said.

First-Class Fred arose and bowed, while as for Jackson Chambers he simply stood still and stared.

He was evidently not a little surprised.

"Ha! I think I have seen that face before!" he exclaimed, excitedly. "Speak, man—who are you?"

"First-Class Fred, sir, at your service," was the unhesitating answer. "You, I presume, from your daughter's introduction, are Mr. Jackson Chambers, of Rhode Island?"

"Then, you are the very individual I want to see!" Chambers declared with emphasis.

"And likewise you are the apple upon which I came here to set my eye," First-Class Fred responded, apparently not in the least discomposed by the ex-broker's tone or manner. "So, as we are mutually satisfied, I see no cause why you shouldn't be seated and join me in a cigar—that is, of course, with your daughter's permission. I always carry a first-class brand of smokers."

"We will adjourn to the outside," Jackson Chambers decided, promptly. "My business with you is private."

He led the way from the cabin, and First-Class Fred had no choice but to follow him.

Instead of choosing the plaza, the ex-broker led the way up the gulch trail to the Cour d'Alene's for a short distance, and then faced about, confronting the handsome stranger.

"Well, now, sir," he began, his tone not exactly civil, "I suppose we may as well understand each other."

"There is not the least reason why we shouldn't," Fred replied. "I presume, judging

by what I have seen, that you *have* seen me before, though I'll agree I don't remember of ever having met you."

"Very likely. We never met before to-night."

"Ah! Then how came you to say you had seen my phiz before?"

"Because I have—on a photograph."

"Ah!"

"Yes, ah! Does the announcement surprise you? Or had you forgotten that you were ever the owner of a photograph?"

"Not at all, sir. And, since you appear to have such a volume of venom on board, might I beg to inquire how you came into possession of one of my pictures, sir?"

"It matters not. I saw the face and swore to see the owner of it, and here I am. Now, then, what have you to say for yourself?"

It was evident that Mr. Chambers was not only angry, but growing vengeful.

First-Class Fred eyed him a moment curiously and then took a step closer.

"See here!" he said, sternly, "what do you want? Out with it, and use more civility in your manner of speech or I'll mop the ground with you despite your age!"

"You will, eh?"

"You can bet high on it. If you want to talk to me as a gentleman, you will find me always on deck. If you do not, I give you a tip that I am first-class in all respects and do not as a rule take back talk from any loafer that lives."

"Sir-rh! Dare you call me a loafer?"

"If your actions warrant the calling, yes. But, go on, sir; I want to know what you want of me."

"I want my child."

"Your child?"

"Exactly—she whom you enticed away from her Eastern home."

"You talk like a crazy man, sir. I know absolutely nothing about your child, except what I have just seen of her at this cabin."

"I do not mean Cherry—I mean the other, whom you wrote to, from Eagle City."

"Oh! you mean Edna Leeds?"

"She that was known as Edna Leeds, yes."

"Why, you surprise me. It was for the purpose of finding out about her that I desired to see you! I learned you had broken up your Eastern home, and were coming this way, and supposed, of course, that Miss Leeds was with you."

"You lie, sir—you lie! You know where she is, and cannot deceive me!" Jackson Chambers cried, hotly.

A gleam of fire leaped instantly into the brilliant orbs of First-Class Fred.

"Look here, sir; I shall expect you to retract those words. I am not an aggressive person but I will take the lie from no man!" he cried.

"You can take it or let it alone, so far as I am concerned. I retract nothing I say."

"Then, if you are not gentleman enough to do that, you shall have the opportunity of fighting me, or by declining, prove yourself a coward. You hear?"

"I will neither retract what I said, nor will I fight you. But, I'll make you tell me where she is—Edna Leeds, I mean—or I'll kill you where you stand!"

A cocked six-shooter suddenly appeared in the ex-broker's hand, leveled full at the breast of the first-class man, who had not deemed it worth while, evidently, to be on his guard.

"Move a muscle, and I'll drop you!" Chambers hissed, venomously. "You may style yourself first-class, but you will find I'd as lief kill you as look at you, and if you don't want me to double you up try to escape or draw a weapon."

"Indeed? You think I am afraid of that little pop-gun? Why, I assure you I am not. And your attempt to terrify me is really too amusing for anything."

"You shall see. You shall tell me what I desire to know, or by the power of Him who rules above, I'll kill you. I am dead in earnest, as any hesitation on your part will prove. Now, then, you wrote to Edna Leeds, didn't you?"

"Yes."

"You advised her to open communication with you, as you had something of utmost importance to communicate to her?"

"Fact."

"Well, what did you write her, afterward?"

"That does not concern you."

"It does. The girl was betrothed to me—was to become my wife, and whatever you wrote her caused her to decamp."

"Impossible. I wrote nothing that should have caused an estrangement."

"Do not lie to me, for it will avail you nothing. If you do not answer me truthfully, when I leave this spot, you will be a dead man."

"Pshaw! I am not afraid of that, although I am telling you the truth. The first letter I wrote her you appear to be cognizant of. Its answer advised me to send any further communications to a different address. I sent but one, and that as requested. I sent her simply a sealed package, which was intrusted to me to deliver to her!"

"You did not know the contents?"

"I did not, although I should presume it was made up of papers and a small amount of money."

"Who gave it to you?"

"That I cannot tell you."

"You shall, curse you!"

"I insist that I cannot, sir!"

"Do you dare refuse, man, with death staring you in the face?"

"Yes, a hundred times, yes!" Fred cried, in a ringing voice.

"Then, your fate be on your own hands!" Jackson Chambers gritted, savagely.

He raised his revolver, and covered the Sport's heart, and—

Did not fire!

CHAPTER VI.

THE SINGULAR MESSAGE.

THE result of the rush from the Eldorado saloon, in quest of the mysterious slayer of Jim Hoon, was, as Goldie Glenn had predicted—fruitless.

And the miners and ruffians came straggling back minus their prey.

Hoon's body was removed, and Jack Hoon, whose back had been badly sprained by his last fall, was taken away by his pals.

Order once more restored, the games were resumed, and Goldie found herself busy until a late hour, for she was a favorite among the more respectable of the crowd, and they patronized her table liberally.

When the business of the night began to wane, however, she flung a cloak about her shoulders, and putting on her hat, left the place, a number of hundred dollars richer than when she had entered it at dusk.

Making her way across the plaza, she entered one of the numerous tented habitations, before which a burly negro, armed to the teeth, kept unceasing vigil.

"Do not go to sleep to-night, Sam," she said in passing him, "and awaken me at the slightest suspicious sound. A few more nights of the sort of luck I have had to-night, and I will be ready to quit this place for good."

"Deed an' dis yar nigger will be dog-goned glad of it, Miss Goldie," the darky mumbled.

Once within the tent, Goldie threw off her wraps and sat down at a rude sort of table, which, with a stool and couch of blankets, was the only furniture.

Taking a little hand-sachel from her waist, where it was fastened by a cord, she opened it and poured the contents upon the table.

There were greenbacks, gold coin, and now and then a little pouch of dust or a small golden nugget—in all a large sum of wealth for one night's winning.

There was no expression of satisfaction upon her face, however, as she counted, but rather a sober, wearied look.

"Not enough yet," she murmured, as she finally restored it to the sachel and fastened it once more about her waist. "It may take many nights yet ere I have the required sum. Then how glad I will be!"

She gave a sigh as if in anxious anticipation of the time to come.

"I wonder who he is?" she mused, her thoughts reverting to Joe Chapman, the wrestler. "I am certain that he took a strong interest in me, or he would not have allowed me to win from him as I did, and would not have espoused my cause by quarreling with Homer. Oh! if I could but penetrate the mystery, what would I not give. Something seems to tell me that I am destined to have trouble soon, though I do not know from what source it can come unless—"

She compressed her lips, as if disliking to utter the name that arose to them; then drew an official-looking envelope from her bosom and extracted a document from it.

This she spread out upon the table and examined carefully, as if to catch the full intent of its meaning.

It was a singular communication at best, and ran as follows:

"BRIMSTONE BAR, — 18, 188—.

"TO THE ONLY HEIR OF JOHN RAPHAEL LEEDS:

"GREETING:—The reception of this document will warn you that the writer came to this country, solitary and unknown, several years ago as a prospector. The locality was a forbidding wilderness—and I grew to love it—the wildness and isolation. Day by day I delved away, prospecting inch by inch of the ground, in hopes of finding the much-coveted strike, for which humanity often barter its very soul. One, two, three years rolled by, but the prospector tired not, although his heart often yearned for the child he had left far away in the East.

"At last, however, I 'struck it rich.' A chance accident placed me in possession of a great secret—the secret of a vast gold mine, wherein was imbedded the riches of a world, all to be had for the working. With a light heart I set industriously to work, and each day turned out a handsome sum of gold, in nuggets and dust, which, as fast as accumulated, I consigned to the safe-keeping of a *cache*, where there was no danger of its being found.

"Thus the days, weeks and months rolled on, and then the lone miner, for the first time, became aware that he was in bad company—was possessed of the devil. His Satanic majesty came daily to the mine, seated himself upon a rock, and watched me labor in grim silence, never interposing, objecting nor speaking. Of course I was alarmed at first, but the regularity of the demon's visits soon caused a cessation of fear, to be superseded by a feeling of resignation to the inevitable.

"Finally, when I had amassed and *cached* a fortune of a number of hundred thousand dollars, the devil spoke and said unto me:

"John Leeds, you have labored faithfully for the interest of your child, and have, by enriching her, placed her eventually in my toils. I am Satan. You have entered my domains and delved from my paradise for her sake, and have provided for her handsomely. You must now delve for me. For every ounce of gold you have extracted for her you must produce one for me. Until you have done so you are my prisoner. Therefore, write to your daughter to come hence. On her arrival, she shall stay here until she has earned ten thousand dollars. That shall be the price of your ransom, for, for that sum you shall again be free. When your daughter comes, I will send her the choice of two husbands, well worthy of her. I will also send a messenger as guard, that no harm comes to her. She shall have suitors in numbers, but between two she shall decide. If she chooses the right one, and pays me the named ransom, you shall go free, for the man she should elect possesses a mystic charm which even I am bound to respect. If she chooses the wrong one, you cease to dig for gold and become forever mine, and your child shall never see you nor the gold you have *cached* for her. It shall be searched for and found by those who serve me better."

"Thus spoke Satan unto me, your informant, and at his command I went forth, wrote these lines, and, with blinded eyes, gave them to one, ordering him to send it to you. By which presents you knoweth my condition, and that which is required of you."

(Signed,)

JOHN RAPHAEL LEEDS."

Goldie Glenn read and re-read the strange communication, her face pale, her eyes luminous with wonder.

"So strange—so very strange!" she murmured. "It seems like the warning of some one unearthly; still it is the chirography of my father. Can such things be—that he is really alive, and still in the power of the Evil One? Oh! that I could solve this awful mystery!"

"P'rhaps, if you were to employ me, I might be of assistance to you!" were the words that sounded in Goldie's ear.

She looked around with a nervous cry. What she saw caused her to utter another cry, this time of alarm.

A man stood within a few feet of her, holding a dangerous-looking "bulldog" revolver in his right hand.

He was attired in black, and wore a black mask before his face.

It was Booth Barron, the outlaw.

"Who are you?" Goldie cried, rising quickly. "Sir, this intrusion is unpardonable! How did you gain entrance here?"

"One question at a time, please," Barron responded coolly. "I am not a walking encyclopedia of answers. As to how I got in here, I chloroformed the African, and my feet brought me in. I should think you would provide yourself with a stronger body-guard, Miss Goldie Glenn Edna Leeds!"

"Sir, I command you to leave my presence at once, or I will scream for help!" the girl cried, greatly excited.

"If you do, it will be your last trumpet-note upon this earth!" was the significant warning. "You've no cause to make a fool of yourself whatever. If I am not mistaken, I fancy I have some little right to call upon you."

And as he finished speaking, the outcast removed his mask.

A darkly handsome face was revealed, with eyes like stars, so bright and scintillating they were: a pleasant mouth, shaded by a slight jety mustache, and hair black and closely cropped.

Goldie uttered an exclamation of surprise, and a tint of pallor crept into her cheeks.

"You, Booth Barron?" she faintly articulated her hands clutching the document, which she quickly restored to her pocket.

"Yes, I, Booth Barron," he responded, calmly. "Is there anything extraordinary in the fact?"

"In Heaven's name, what brings you here? I—I—"

"You thought I was in jail, eh, where you left me, and cruelly deserted me. Ah! Edna Leeds, I never thought you would prove so false."

"I knew nothing of your crime, until long after I had left the Chambers home, therefore you cannot accuse me of that. As for deserting you, at all, I did not, sir, for you had no claim upon me!"

"I did! I did! You encouraged me more than any of the others, and when I asked you to have me, you—"

"I told you I was not prepared to give you a definite answer—and neither was I; knowing it would be a negative, I dreaded to hurt your feelings and feared your vengeful spirit."

"How very sensitive, indeed! One would almost imagine you a woman with a heart! If you knew your answer was to be 'no' why did you encourage me?"

"I did not encourage you. If you misconstrued my kindly reception of you as a sign of affection, I am very sorry."

"Oh! yes—not a doubt of it. You were a hair-brained, stone-hearted coquette and you drove me to do what I did, and am as much responsible for Charlie Chambers's death as I am."

"You reason without sense, and I cannot see what satisfaction you can derive from coming here and annoying me."

"Ha! I annoy you, do I? Well, let me then suggest that if you do not act a little more sensible, the chances are, that I will annoy you to some effect before I've done with you. Edna, I am a hunted outcast!"

"It is not my fault, Booth. I would be the last one to counsel you to do what you did or to uphold you in your evil course."

"Yet, you were the prime cause of my doing what I did. I loved you—fairly idolized you, and believing you were to be mine, was tempted to do what I did—rob the bank—for your sake. Oh! Edna, do not go back on me, now, when all the world has deserted me, because of my unfortunate act!"

He dropped on his knees, before her, and clasped his hands, imploringly.

Tears were in his eyes; penitence in the expression of his face.

Any one at first questioning his love for her, would have now been satisfied that he was in earnest.

She looked down at him, pityingly, but with an expression of decision in her manner.

"Don't, Booth!" she said, kindly. "You not only make me but yourself unhappy. I do not love you—I will be honest and frank with you—and can never be ought to you, but a friend, and that I will always be if I see you try to do what is right."

He bowed his face in his hands, and heard the verdict; then, after a moment, he arose, his face pale and stern, and a gleam in his eyes that was not pleasant to encounter.

"I rather expected this of you!" he said, in a hoarse whisper, as he bent toward her—"I rather expected it of you, and therefore, my disappointment is not so keen as it might otherwise have been. If my love is not dead, it will gradually change to hatred and a thirst for vengeance. Do you hear—vengeance! If you refuse to marry me, there are plenty of ways to get even with you!"

"Doubtless, sir. You are now showing the evil of your nature. Do you suppose I would link my lot with a man like you? No! a thousand times, no! Be a man, Booth Barron, and at least compel my respect; or be a ruffian, and forfeit it—as you choose, sir. I trust you will not prolong this interview, but take your departure, at once."

"Not quite yet, my girl. I want you to understand me. I now prefer your hatred to your respect without your love. I read that document over your shoulder, and see that you would still seek an opportunity to break others' hearts, as you have mine. I might have sweeter vengeance by causing you to live in torture, but shall not. She who would not be mine shall never belong to another—I swear it!"

He thrust the revolver into its holster, and drew a keen-bladed knife instead.

An instant later he was towering over her like an exultant demon, his upraised hand clutching the vengeful knife.

CHAPTER VII.

THE GOPHER GENT TO THE RESCUE.

JACKSON CHAMBERS did not fire; for the revolver was wrested from his grasp!

With a cry of rage he wheeled to confront his adversary, but to his unbounded astonishment, discovered no one!

Not a single living human being was within the range of his vision.

"By all the plagues! who seized that pistol?" he cried, both furious and mystified.

A low laugh from First Class Fred caused him to wheel again with an oath, to find that the sport now held the drop himself.

"At your service, sir—First Class Fred, the Gent from Gopher!" was the salutation. "Pon my word, friend Chambers it looks a bit as if I was on top of the heap after all, does it not? Very much obliged to that invisible somebody who relieved you of your blooming 'six.' How d'ye like the situation at the present time?"

"Curse you! Put down that weapon—it might go off."

"Just as likely to as not, for it has a hair-trigger, and my nerves are not of the steadiest or most reliable, I assure you. Still, you did not consider the danger I was in just a bit ago!"

Chambers saw that the tables were fairly turned, and naturally felt ill at ease.

"You see!" Fred went on complacently, "that the old poultry adage, 'that it's not policy to count your chickens before they're hatched,' comes in with beautiful aptness just now. A moment or so ago you had me backed, and my baggage checked for a trip up Salt river, but a bubble in the boiler of your nautical craft burst, and I am still here—in fact, very muchly here. And now, in regard to business matters, let me tell you that I have tumbled gracefully to your little racket. You have come West in search of your former ward, because you have an idea that she is heiress to a fortune, and you can get a slice of it!"

"It's false! She is my betrothed wife, and I mean to make her marry me."

"Indeed! What proceedings do you propose to bring about this singular consummation?"

"That's none of your business!"

"Ah! Isn't it? Now, really, I thought it was. Supposing you diverge from useless formality, now, and be confidential!" and the hammer of the sport's revolver came back to a full cock, with a suggestive click.

"Stop! If you shoot you'll be hung!" the ex-broker cried, nervously.

"And I'll be hanged if I don't shoot if you don't answer me straight. Answer my question, or I'll shoot your boots full of air-holes!"

"Furies seize you!"

"Go on—out with it. How do you propose to make the girl marry you?"

"She was the accomplice to the murder of my son, and if she refuses to marry me, I'll give her up to the law!" Chambers declared, vindictively.

"You will?"

"By all the plagues, yes. Her neck shall fill a hangman's noose."

"What will I be doing all this time?"

"Humph! You'll not dare to hinder or interfere."

"You will see. Now, then, let me give you a little bit of friendly advice. You pack up your effects and get out of this camp as fast as you know how. I'll let you go, now, out of piteous contempt for you, but if sunrise finds you in Brimstone Bar, just so sure as deer-meat is good eating, that sure will you hear from me—an' I'm from Gopher. Go!"

Jackson Chambers did not hesitate, nor did he make any response to this threat of the dashing sport.

Lucky in escaping so easily, he made haste toward his cabin without pausing to look back.

The would-be assassin of Edna Leeds was spared the awful crime which the uplifted hand was to consummate. Goldie, as we shall still continue to call her was untouched, for the descending blade was buried in Barron's own leg, above the knee, inflicting a painful wound. At the same instant, he was raised bodily and thrown upon the ground with a force that seemingly must have broken every bone in his body.

"There! lie there you cowardly cur!" a voice cried, "and move a muscle at the peril of your life!" and a man's foot was planted upon the vicious lover's breast.

It was First-Class Fred who had opportunely interrupted the act, and his face flushed with

indignation, as his gaze roved from Goldie to her assailant.

"Who is this chap?" the Gent from Gopher demanded, drawing a revolver and cocking it. "Who is he, that would attempt to kill one like you?"

"Oh! sir, do not harm him!" Edna cried, imploringly. "He is a friend of mine, and knew not what he was about, sir—oh! indeed he did not!"

"Oh! he didn't know what he was about, eh? Well! well! that strikes me as being rather singular. It don't often occur that a man tries his hand at carving anatomy, unless he has some faint idea what he's up to. Who is this fellow?"

"Oh! sir, he is a friend of mine, and he got angry at me, and he's not very much to blame. Please let him up, sir!"

"Let him up, to get another chance at you?"

"He will not try it again—indeed, he will not. You won't, will you, Booth?"

"No!" was the gruff answer. "Let me up. The knife's sticking in my leg."

"It ought to be sticking in your heart, instead!" First-Class Fred said, removing his foot from the villain's chest. "Now, look here, my incipient murderer, before you get up beg this young lady's pardon."

"I beg it, of course," Barron said, ungraciously. "She made me mad, and I didn't stop to consider the consequences of what I was doing."

"A pretty nice way of getting out of it. I ain't sure but what I ought to shoot you, as it is. But, since the young lady is so fond of giving you another chance at her throat, you shall have three minutes to get out of the camp. Get up, now, and scoot!"

"With pleasure, my lord! Your kindness shall ne'er be forgotten!" the outlaw declared, as he arose and limped from the tent.

First-Class Fred followed him outside, and watched him until he was out of sight, then, he turned, to find Goldie standing near him.

"Oh! sir, I have to thank you, so much, for rescuing me," she said, frankly putting forth her hand. "I think he would have killed me, but for your opportune arrival."

"There's not the shadow of a doubt about the matter," the Gent from Gopher declared, dryly. "Still you seemed nothing loth that he should have another opportunity at you."

"Oh! no—but I do not wish that harm should come to him. He loves me, and because I cannot encourage his hopes, he is jealous, and not responsible for what he says, or does."

"Indeed! By the way, I see a mark there on the floor. From that I should infer that the fellow is an outlaw."

Goldie's face flushed, and for a moment, she knew not what to say.

"He is an outlaw, in name!" she finally said, "but not at heart. A hastily performed act caused his banishment from among honest people, and he is now a wandering outcast, with no one to love or pity him."

"It is sad; but that does not excuse him for attempting to murder you. Excuse me, young lady, but may I ask your name? Something seems to give me the impression that I know you better than a stranger."

"And, I, too, fancy I have seen your face. You are the one who wrote to me in the East—you are First Class Fred."

"Correct you are! And naturally, I may know you, as Miss Edna Leeds."

"That is my name, although I am known here, as Goldie Glenn."

"Why the change of title, may I ask?"

"I made the change because I expected to be pursued by enemies, and thought a different name would aid me, somewhat, in concealing my identity."

"What enemies did you have, who would be apt to pursue you?"

"I found, just previous to my flight, that the man with whom I had been left, by my father, was a scheming villain, and was bent on becoming my husband. Satisfied that my only safety lay in flight, I ran away, and came here."

"And this man's name?"

"Was Jackson Chambers."

"As I thought. Your opinion of him was not without good foundation. He is a villain of the first water, and his purpose is to marry you, in hopes that he can thus get hold of a fortune he suspects you of inheriting."

"Ah! Do you know him, then?"

"By slight acquaintance, yes. I intend to know more of him, too, if he tries any funny games. I suppose you are aware that he is in this camp!"

"No! no! Jackson Chambers in Brimstone Bar? Impossible!"

And Edna's face blanched with terror.

"It is quite possible, young lady, and a fact, I assure you!" First-Class Fred said. "Not over an hour ago I had an interview with him, and warned him to get up and get out of the town. I have no doubt, however, but what he will stay."

"Then, if he does, there will be no remedy for me but to again pick up my few effects and fly, for I could not remain here, to endure his persecution."

"Fear him not, young lady. While First-Class Fred is around you need have no uneasiness or alarm. If the man annoys you, you can rest assured I will attend to his case."

"I thank you, very much, I am sure, but I could not think of asking a total stranger to fight my battles, for me. I see no better way than for me to leave this place, and locate in some strange town, where he will not so easily find me."

"Pooh! Nonsense! You remain right where you are, and consider me your protector. If Jackson Chambers shows his cloven foot, I'll agree to make it so uncomfortable for him, that he will be glad to leave these parts, with all haste. You need not have a fear that he will ever again trouble you."

"You are very kind, sir; but still I cannot bring myself to believe that I am doing right by depending on you for protection."

"Rest easy on that score, Miss Leeds. Indeed, I believe I am entitled to the privilege of befriending you, if any one is!"

"I am sure I shall appreciate your friendship, sir. But tell me. How came you to write me and send me the sealed package?"

"That I will explain, so far as I can, for it is somewhat of a mystery to me. You see, I was prospecting up in the mountains one day, and becoming wearied, lay down for a noonday nap. When I awoke, it was to find the sealed package upon my person, and also a note, requesting me to communicate with you, and then send you the sealed package, together with my photograph. I did so, and that was the last I heard from you. I wrote you afterward, but getting no answer, came to the conclusion that you either had no occasion for further correspondence with me, or was *en route* for this part of the country. And it turned out that the latter was the case."

"Yes. The nature of the communication I received in the sealed package was instrumental in my coming here. After you read it, perhaps you can assist in throwing some light upon the matter, which now remains a mystery to me!"

CHAPTER VIII.

AN OPINION.

AND so saying, she handed him the document to read, which she had herself been examining a short time before, when interrupted by Booth Barron.

First-Class Fred seated himself, and gave it a careful perusal, digesting the contents as he read.

"Well, this is rather a singular thing," he said finally. "Is this your father's chirography, Miss Leeds?"

"It is, beyond a doubt. I would know his handwriting anywhere."

"What do you think of the nature of this extraordinary communication?"

"I do not know what to think, sir. It was mainly in hopes of being able to throw some light on this matter that I came here."

"Exactly. You pursued the right course, no doubt. Have you gained any additional news since you came here?"

"Not to speak of. That my father was in this vicinity, some months ago, there can be no doubt. It seems, also, to be known to some of the miners that he buried a fortune in gold in the vicinity, for a quiet but energetic search is daily in progress for it."

"Ah! Who is at the head of the movement?" Fred demanded, eagerly.

"A local rough named Jack Homer. He carries the idea that I know where the gold is secreted, as do many of the other miners, and they have made attempts to force me to tell them that which I do not know. Their attempts, however, are fruitless, and I brave them, believing they dare not offer me violence, from the fact that a strange, invisible friend, known as the Deadly Drop, seems to ever watch over me."

She then related all that was known concerning the unseen and mysterious avenger, to which the Gent from Gopher listened attentively.

"Well," he said, when she had done, "it looks

probable that your father has a valuable cache of gold somewhere in the vicinity, as he states; but this story about his being claimed and imprisoned by Satan, is of course all nonsense."

"But, sir, where is my father, and what was his object in sending me the strange letter?"

"I am sorry I am not able to answer you. The only thing we have to base an explanation on is that your father is *crazy*!"

"Oh, sir—that would be awful!"

"Very true, Miss Leeds, very true. But that is the only practical solution of this problem. I look at the matter in this light. Having amassed a considerable fortune, your parent's mind has become turned, from fear of losing it, and by a strange freak of mind imagines himself in the power of the Evil One, and by him held a prisoner."

"If this be so, it would be better if I never found him."

"Quite true, unless the sight of you might have the effect to restore his reason."

"That is not probable."

"No. I guess you are right. There is something about the case, however, that is not plain to me. This Deadly Drop—who or what is he, or she, whichever it may be?"

"I have no idea. If my father is indeed not possessed of his right senses, might it not be he who has assumed the role?"

"There are large chances that it may be. However, this unseen avenger must be a most accurate marksman, as you have told me that each one of his victims is invariably shot in the center of the forehead. Was your father so good a shot?"

"That would be impossible for me to say, as I was but a small child when he came West. He has had ample chance to become a good shot, in the time he has been absent."

"No doubt. Now, Miss Leeds, I shall take pleasure in being of assistance to you all that I possibly can, and I trust that we can, by working together, do much toward clearing up this mystery, and perhaps obtain for you, the buried treasure."

"You are very kind, sir, I am sure. I place greater confidence in you than I would otherwise do, owing to the fact that you were selected to deliver the message to me."

"And your confidence shall not be misplaced, I assure you. What business are you engaged in, here?"

Goldie's cheeks flushed almost scarlet.

She had been expecting he would ask this, with a nervous sort of dread and horror.

How was she to tell him her calling, and ever look him in the face, again?

Yet he must certainly find it out, sooner or later.

"I am almost ashamed to tell you," she said, averting her face to conceal her embarrassment, as much as possible. "When I first arrived here, I was out of money, and not knowing what else to turn my hands to, I began playing cards, at the Eldorado, for money. As a result, having been very lucky, I am still there."

"There is nothing surprising to me, in this fact, I assure you. I have met and known several respectable women, who flipped the pasteboards for a living—not exactly from a choice, but because they had no other vocation. And, now, since you are located as you are, I advise you to go right along with your business, and we will await developments. I will see that you are not troubled, or, in case of my absence, that you have ample protection. I must be going now, and trust that you will not be further molested, after restoring your colored companion to consciousness."

And tipping his hat, the Gent from Gopher sauntered away.

CHAPTER IX.

THE POOLING OF ISSUES.

SATISFIED that Edna Leeds could easily be found at the Eldorado. Jackson Chambers did not make any extra exertions to see her, at once, for he wanted time to consider just what moves he was to make, in the game he intended to play.

He arose, bright and early, the next morning, and leaving Brimstone Bar behind, took a walk up the Cœur d'Alene trail.

It was a bright morning, with an invigorating breeze blowing down from the distant snow-capped mountain peaks—just the sort of a morning for a thoughtful stroll.

"By shrewd maneuvering, only, can I hope to win my point!" he mused, as he walked. "I have got to play for all, or nothing, and the present state of my finances demands that I should win. To do this is to fight a battle such

as few men ever before fought, single-handed. I have a man to contend against who is dangerous in more ways than one. Shrewd, sharp and daring, this First-Class Fred is in my path and I both hate and fear him! Curse him!" he exclaimed aloud, in his excitement, "if he thwarts me he is a dead man!"

"Then, since you have so much at stake, why not pool our issues and divide the profits?"

The astonished schemer paused, for there in his path stood Booth Barron, blockading his passage, a formidable pair of revolvers in his grasp.

"You, Booth Barron!" he cried. "Curses on you, chance has once more thrown you in my way!"

"Oh! no!" Barron coolly replied. "Chance had nary a thing to do with it. I purposely threw myself in your way, knowing that you were searching for me."

"I have not been searching for you. I hoped you were in Hades, long ago."

"Ah! did you really wish to let me off as cheap as that? You are kind. But, you see, I happen to know that you have a paid detective on my track; so here I am!"

"You are mistaken, Booth Barron. I never expected nor wished to set eyes on you again."

"Sorry, Jackson, old fellow, that my confidence in your veracity is not sufficient to warrant me in believing your pleasantry. I have already sized your man and am satisfied that Joe Chapman is not only a detective, but a very keen one. I congratulate you on your selection, but, just tell Joseph, while you are tendering him my respects, that I defy a dozen like him, and he will never lay a hand on me."

"Boast not, you cowardly assassin, for retribution will sooner or later overtake you, even though you hold the advantage of the drop at the present time. Your neck will yet fit in the hangman's noose for the murder of my boy!"

"If I did assassinate him, it was at the instigation of another. If I committed murder, another plotted the crime and tempted me by money and great promises to do the deed."

"What? Do you mean to tell me that you, whom everybody once thought to be an honorable man, was hired to do that dastard crime?"

"Just what I do declare. But, though I sinned, I was terribly tempted—more so than you can even imagine. I did not come here to palliate my crime. I have regretted it most truly and the thought of it has made me a very desperate man. I have sought you at this time to say that I can be of immense service to you. You are about to get yourself into serious trouble, and I know that by letting bygones be bygones, we could mutually reap a great harvest—one of a lifetime."

Chambers eyed the outlaw, however, with doubtful, gleaming eyes.

"You say you did not willingly murder Charlie?" he said, slowly—"that you was hired to do it? Tell me, who, in God's name, would hire you to do such a thing? Perhaps I shall be more ready and willing to consider what further you have to say if you can prove what you have confessed."

Barron laughed good-naturedly.

"Well, one whom you would least suspect," he said, keeping a close watch upon the ex-broker. "You may or may not be aware that while Charlie was fickle in his attachments, there was one who favored him more than she did other suitors, and yet at that very time she was desperately in love with me, and I with her. I finally discovered, however, that she was fishing for Charlie because she knew you had made a will bequeathing all to him. See?"

"I comprehend. You have reference to Edna Leeds."

"Yes. As soon as she knew you had changed your mind—had destroyed the first will and made a new one, she came to me and let the cat-of-her-intentions out of the bag, and invited me into the concoction of several first-class schemes. One of them was for me to kill you, and she would then claim to have been your wife, and obtain control of your estate by destroying the second will. This I utterly refused to consider, even with the promise of her hand in marriage, and a life of ease and luxury to follow."

"The next thing proposed was that I rob the bank. We would then run away together and get married. As you know, I got so far as tackling a part of my mission when I was nabbed. Fearing I would make known her share in the enterprise, the girl lit out."

Jackson Chambers listened with so much composure that the narrator was piqued.

"Barron, are you willing to take your oath

that Edna Leeds was your evil genius in your criminal proceedings?"

"I am willing to swear a hundred times that she was my evil genius—that she had me so irretrievably in her power that she could literally twist me around her finger at will."

"I think, then, I can understand how you became responsible for my son's death," Chambers said bitterly. "At one time that girl could work me to her will, so infatuated was I with her—and therefore I hold you less to blame than I would otherwise do."

"I was so sure you would when you came to understand matters," Barron declared, "that it gave me hope of your forgiveness, and that together we might successfully work against the evil genius of us both."

"You have taken a sensible view of the matter, and while it would be unnatural for me to forgive the great wrong you have done me, if there is anything to be gained by it, the memory of the crime can be dropped, and no allusion be made to it hereafter."

"Then, the next thing is for us to understand one another. You came here in search of Edna Leeds?"

"I did."

"You believe her to be here?"

"I do."

"What cause have you for believing this?"

"My agent—"

"You mean Chapman, your detective?"

"Well yes, if you choose to dub him so. He came here in advance of me and began a search which resulted in his setting his eye on a female gambler at the Eldorado, calling herself Goldie Glenn. He believes her to be my fugitive ward."

"And you?"

"I haven't the slightest doubt about the matter."

"You haven't? Well, I have seen her, too. I paid her a visit, but got coolly received, and was dumped on the ground by a sport who is the perfect picture of Joe Chapman."

"The deuce you say!"

"Yes. He balances all to the name of 'First-Class Fred!'"

"Is it possible? It was of First-Class Fred I was speaking when you interrupted me."

"I suspected as much. You evidently have met him?"

"Yes. He called to see me, and we went up the Cœur d'Alene trail to have a confab. I got the drop on him, but my pistol was suddenly and mysteriously snatched away, by some invisible hand, and the fellow turned the tables on me and ordered me out of the town."

"I suppose you'll go?"

"When I get ready, of course."

"That's the talk! Don't let him bluff you, but let's pool our issues, and fight him together. One important thing is money. Report has it that there is an immense treasure of gold, buried in or about this camp, and there are several parties eager to find it. A movement is on foot for a combined effort to prosecute the search and to keep others off the premises. Here is the call."

He handed Chambers a written notice, which ran as follows:

"TO WHOM CONCERNED:

"This notice is submitted to a select few, that may be by it interested and benefited."

"A meeting will be held to-night for the purpose of drafting rules and regulations of an organization, and for the purpose of deciding upon the most feasible plan for finding and securing to our mutual benefit, the immense *cached* treasure, of one John R. Leeds, reasonably supposed to be concealed close to the town of Brimstone Bar. Publicity of this movement is not desirable, so it is suggested that every visitor be properly disguised, and that one member shall not be personally known to another. Further particulars at the meeting, which will take place on Cœur d'Alene trail, at the mouth of Dark Run, at nine o'clock, to-night."

"By order of

"EL CAPTAIN."

"Who is he?" Chambers asked.

"It matters not. Come, and we may learn much that will be the means of furthering our own plans."

"Very well. I will be there!"

CHAPTER X.

ESTELLE THE HAT-THROWER.

CHAMBERS returned to the Bar, and seeking the general store, and the proprietor's confidence, was able to procure such articles, and make such alterations, that when he emerged from the store he was so well disguised that his own daughter would not have known him, had she met him on the street.

He was thus able to wander about town during the day, *incognito*, and visited the Eldorado

saloon several times, remaining an hour or two. Goldie Glenn presided at her table, as usual, and was well patronized, for more reasons than one.

Now, she had a professional card-sharp to deal with, whose object was to fleece her if he could, which was not often accomplished. Then came a miner, very flush, who could not stand prosperity, and was not heart-broken if he won or lost at a social game of draw; next, an impecunious tenderfoot, not entirely "broke," but hopeful of bettering his financial condition.

Goldie treated one and all, with equal courtesy, and as she won oftener than lost, the day's play added sensibly to her hoard.

First-Class Fred was seen about the Eldorado, but Chambers noticed that he seldom approached Goldie's table. Whether this was by agreement or not, he was unable to decide.

The more the ex broker gazed upon the pretty face of the card queen, the firmer became his belief, that, without the shadow of a doubt, she was the real Edna Leeds, who had been his ward.

Yet, one thing puzzled him: to his certain knowledge the girl never had any experience with cards or card playing, and if she had become an expert, in the few months she had been absent from his Eastern home, her case was without a parallel.

Her mannerisms at the card-table, too, somewhat differed from those of the Edna who had graced his home and was the belle of the village.

Nevertheless, no moderate argument could have dissuaded him from the belief that she was other than his runaway ward, and he was several times on the point of going forward, and speaking to her, but remembered Booth Barron's advice, and refrained from doing so.

Just toward evening, a little breeze was stirred up, to break the monotony that had prevailed during the better part of the day.

It was caused by the appearance within the saloon, of two characters, who both seemed out of place in a camp like Brimstone Bar.

The one was a youth of perhaps fifteen years, of remarkably handsome figure, which was shown off to good advantage, for his attire was a suit of cotton, flesh colored tights, such as is usually worn in the circus ring. His feet were incased in tight slippers, and upon his head was a clown's hat.

His face, too, was painted up, ludicrously, in clown-fashion, and its contortions elicited roars of laughter from the rough crowd."

His companion was attired in a short gauzy costume similar to those worn by girl bare back riders of the arena, only, in this instance, the tinselled skirt reached below the knees, and the dress was not cut low in the neck. She wore a jaunty fur turban upon her head, from beneath which her wealth of brown hair rippled almost to her waist.

Her feet were incased in slippers, with flesh-colored hose; her arms were bare, white, and shapely, and her hands glittered with costly rings.

In face—but stay! Let us note the expressions upon other faces.

Jackson Chambers half rises from his seat, with an incredulous gasp, his gaze riveted upon the new comer, in the eagerness of doubt.

First Class Fred, over there, leaning against the bar, straightens up, a flush growing upon either cheek, and gives the new-comers his strict attention. Several other bystanders glance first from the face of the girl in short attire, to Goldie Glenn, the card queen, and then back again, in astonishment.

The faces of the two girls are as alike as two photographs, taken from one negative!

In every respect is the resemblance complete—cast of features, expressions of face, eyes, and mouth; hair—all.

Just at this point, a wiry little third party glides into the Eldorado, and into position, between the two "sarcus" folks.

He is a Frenchman. His nose—his darting, little, shrewd eyes—indeed, his very presence, betrays his nationality; yet he speaks most admirable English.

"Ladies and gentlemen, I have the honor of introducing to your notice the young Monsieur La Rode and the charming Mlle. Estelle from Le Grand Cirque, Paris, both of whom have been engaged by me, at enormous expense, to exhibit in this country, where true talent never lacks for hearty appreciation—especially among the critical audiences of the far West. (Applauds). As we have arrived too late in the day for any formal exhibition, I would respectfully say that my great aggregation of wonders, known as Varleri's Continental Congress of Co-

lossal Novelties will give two exhibitions, tomorrow afternoon and evening, upon the plaza, and that all who patronize will get their money's worth. As a small advertisement of what is in store for my patrons, I will introduce the Monsieur and Mademoiselle in a few of their specialties, with your kind indulgence."

No need to say that a rousing cheer ensued.

There was an instantaneous buzz of excitement and the *habitués* of the Eldorado felt like yelling out their joy at the glad tidings.

A circus coming to town!

A big holiday—and a big drunk—in store.

What more could the human pulse of that wild town wish for to set it 'way up in G.

First-Class Fred still stood at the bar. He had glanced but once or twice at Goldie Glenn to discover that she had recognized Estelle; the tell tale color that suffused either cheek of the queen betrayed that.

But hers was a face that was hard to read, even when she was excited or confused.

Jackson Chambers, in his disguise of a mountaineer, had resumed his seat once more, and his gaze, like that of the Gent from Gopher, dwelt alternately upon the faces of the two girls.

"Now, ladies and gentlemen," called out Varleri, "I will leave my stars to amuse you for a few minutes while I attend to some outside business."

He then skurried away, while Master La Rode and his beautiful companion began their performance.

Estelle first assisted the boy to do some clever gymnastic feats. Then, after she had placed herself against the wall, backward, he borrowed a score of bowie-knives and hurled them with such precision that they became imbedded close around her until she was literally pinned to the wall, and yet unharmed by as much as a scratch.

The next act was for twenty long-necked whisky bottles to be procured from the bar and placed upon the floor in an upright position in a circle and several inches apart.

La Rode then procured a spade, and standing upon the ears of it, danced around among the bottles without touching or overturning one of them. It was a clever act, and received merited applause from the enthusiastic audience.

The culminating act was for Estelle to produce six clown hats, similar to the one worn by her companion, La Rode. She then positioned herself about ten feet away and sent hat after hat spinning through the air, all of which descended in rotation upon the boy's head.

La Rode then retreated ten feet further, and the act was repeated with extra dexterity.

"Gude enuff fer a gal, but et takes an ole lantern jawed galoot from Smokestack ter beat it," a burly, disgusting looking bullwhacker cried who had witnessed the feat.

"Go to the end of the ball, La Rode," Estelle said to the boy, paying no attention to the speaker.

La Rode returned the hats to her and then sought the further end of the apartment.

It was a distance of full thirty feet, and as the reader can well imagine a long distance for a person to hurl a hat with anything like precision.

A murmur of wonderment escaped the crowd, for they believed it impossible for the beautiful Estelle to accomplish the feat at that distance.

The bullwhacker turned up his nose in infinite disgust.

"Ker-whoop! That aire a spordin' old reach, but while I ther old Howlin' Hatchet from Cherry-tree kin do it every time, I've got golden ducats ter allow you can't do it, me charmer!" he remarked, swaggering nearer to the girl.

She turned a flashing glance upon him, measuring him from head to foot.

"Who are you addressing your remarks to?" she demanded, haughtily.

"Why, to you, ter be sure," he replied.

Without another word she turned her attention to La Rode, and giving a cry of "hip!" sent the hats whizzing through the air.

One after another they gracefully settled upon the youth's head, one on top of another, until they had all reached their goal, and were stacked in a pyramid.

A yell of admiration and cries of "Bravo!" went up on all sides.

Howlin' Hatchet danced closer to Mlle. Estelle, a sort of leering grin upon his ugly face.

"Ye did it, me gal—ye did it like a leetle man; but I kin beat it, by ther Eye-toothed Ezekiel, I kin! Jest ye stan' yer boy out on ther plaza, an' I'll stan' sixty feet from him an' do yer same act, or eat my brogans. That's

me, the Howlin' Hatchet, an' I live on chicken-brains to boot!"

"There is no use to argue with you, sir—you could not do it. It is an impossibility."

"I'm bettin' a hundred ter one I kin do it!" the bullwhacker declared.

"Very well, I'll bet you. I'll reverse the order, however, so you will not be a heavy loser. I'll bet you a hundred dollars against one that you cannot do it."

"Taken. Fetch your pard."

"Come, La Rode."

And with sparkling eyes, the fair hat-thrower led the way from the Eldorado out upon the plaza.

Did the crowd follow?

Nothing short of a free fight would have kept them inside the saloon.

Unless he was a more remarkable being by far than he looked, the bullwhacker would be beaten, and every one was actually eager to witness such a result.

Stakes were driven sixty feet apart, and La Rode took his position at the further one, while Howlin' Hatchet stood by the other.

"Now give me the hats!" he yelled. "Let me illustrate how easy I kin clip ther sarcus gal's conceit!"

The hats were handed him, and after giving them a trifling examination, he sent them flying through the air, one after another.

Instead of going sixty feet every one of them fell to the ground at a distance of not over ten feet from the starting-place.

A series of groans and cat-wauls rent the air.

"Oh, scree away, galoots!" Howlin' Hatchet sung out. "I kin stand it!"

"You have lost. I will take the dollar, if you please," Estelle said, stepping forward.

"No, ye won't!" the bullwhacker declared. "I hain't got nary red cent ter my name!"

"You miserable skunk!" cried First Class Fred, striding forward. "Is that the way you treat ladies? If so, you've struck the wrong camp to operate it. Deliver up the dollar the lady won of you, or I'll break every bone in your body!"

And by his tone, the Gent from Gopher was evidently dead in earnest.

Howlin' Hatchet gazed at him a moment with an angry scowl.

"See hyer!" he growled. "Who aire you an' what do you want?"

"I am First-Class Fred, and I want you to fork over the dollar she won of you!"

"I hain't got nary a dollar to my name, I'll swar, stranger!"

"Then why did you seek to place her in so awkward a position by betting when you knew you had no money?"

"'Ca'se I wanted ter git a free interdooce tew ther public in ginerel!"

"Then, oy Jupiter, I'll see that you get it, you cur!" the sport cried sternly.

In a twinkling he pounced upon the bullwhacker, and, seizing him as though he were but a child, raised him bodily in the air and dashed him heavily to the ground.

As Howlin' Hatchet struck *terra firma* with a thud and a grunt, a hand tapped First-Class Fred upon the arm, while a cool voice cried:

"That will do. Hadn't you better turn your attention to a more worthy subject?"

The speaker was Joe Chapman, the wrestler-detective.

CHAPTER XI.

THE APOLLOS MEET.

FIRST CLASS FRED wheeled around and confronted his accoster, without an exclamation to denote the surprise he must have felt.

His face, however, grew hard in its expression, and the flashes of his eyes had hatred in them.

Joe Chapman's face was likewise sternly set, and the bystanders came to the immediate conclusion that the men were enemies.

The wrestler's words, too, were as good as a challenge.

What was impending?

Were these two specimens of well-developed manhood to settle some feud of the past, now and here?

If so, the Brimstone Bar folk were nothing loth to be present at a "funeral."

But, what was this?

A discovery is suddenly made.

These two Apollos are literal counterparts, in point of general resemblance, except that the Gopher Gent's hair is lighter in hue and more luxuriant than that of his companion.

What strange coincidence this, that two pairs of people should meet in a little camp like Brim-

stone Bar, all in one afternoon, whose resemblances were so marvelously marked?

That First-Class Fred and Chapman might be brothers, seemed possible, but the Bar-ites had little time to reflect upon this fact, now.

"Well, sir, I am at your service. What do you want?" was Fred's composed answer.

"That is a foolish question to ask!" Chapman responded, coldly. "Is it not understood between us, that the pair of us cannot live in the same camp?"

"That has hitherto been the understanding, sir, and, it has been obeyed to the letter. I am also aware that, at our last meeting prior to this rather than kill you until the day set for our final duel, I evacuated the town. Do I understand that you would have me repeat that action now?"

"You could not have guessed straighter," Chapman confidently rejoined. "I happen to have been first in Brimstone Bar, and do not propose to vamoose. You are the last comer, and as one small camp, like this, is not large enough to hold us both, it devolves upon you to play Arab—fold your tent, and silently steal away."

"Which I unhesitatingly refuse to do. I am here to stay, and if either goes it shall be you!"

"Never!" Chapman cried, determinedly. "I, too, am here to stay!"

The faces of the two men were now dark with passion, and their eyes emitted gleams of deadly hatred.

They thus stood eying each other, neither offering to precipitate an assault.

"Well, what is to be done about it?" First-Class Fred demanded, finally. "You say you will not quit Brimstone Bar—neither will I. According to our agreement you are breaking your word. Do I understand, then, that our difficulty shall be forever settled to-day, instead of waiting until the fourth of May?"

Chapman did not answer immediately, but seemed to be cogitating. His brows were knitted, and apparently he was at loss what answer to give.

"I see no other way than that we shall have to come to a final settlement now, sir!" he at length answered. "As neither of us will go the death-duel set apart for May 4'h must take place to-day. What shall it be—knives or pistols?"

It was now the turn of the Gent from Gopher to delay answering for a moment, during which time his gaze roved quickly over the sea of faces that surrounded the plaza.

"Neither knives or pistols will do," he said.

"We are both expert with them, and probably would kill each other, which the feud does not demand. Therefore I suggest that we take a recess of twenty minutes to half an hour to originate some better form of duel. The one suggesting the most ingenious and at the same time the fairest plan for both shall win the choice. How do you like it?"

"I am satisfied. Three disinterested parties shall be chosen to decide between our proposed methods, as regards which is the fairest, and at the same time the most novel."

"Agreed!"

Without another word the two foes separated and walked away.

First Class Fred went to the Eldorado; Chapman toward the supply-store, which also contained the post-office.

As for the denizens of that wild camp, they were in a feverish state of curiosity and excitement. Not only were they nonplused to know why these two strange men were such implacable enemies, but they were also curious to know which would be the lucky inventor of the most original plan for settling their quarrel.

In the mean time, the crowd did not leave their places about the plaza, and Howlin' Hatchet, the terror, having partly recovered from the shock of his fall, arose, and shook himself, as a great shaggy dog might have done.

"Whar's ther galoot w'ot swiped me?" he bel-lowed, glaring ferociously around. "Where is he, I say?"

"Oh! he'll be out here, in a jiffy, "a bystander assured, "an' ef you want ter git off with a whole back, you'd better git up and puckachee!"

"What! me puckachee—me, the French-freckled Howlin' Hatchet from Cherry-tree? Oh, no! Nary a time, frum now ter twenty-seven o'clock! I'm a stayer. I am, and heer I wait until he returns. By ther way, feller-galoots, I ain't no slouch, ef I do look it, an' hyer I am, fer ye all ter gaze at. Ain't I a daisy, tho'? You bet; but 'tain't every one as

appreciates the wholesome fack. I'm a snorter, I am, an' I've got whiskers on my eye-teeth. Don't some anymile wanter come trim 'em? Hev ye all had a fair look at me? Do I look like a darned fool? No sir-ee! Nor I ain't. I hold ther key-note ter ther biggest secret in these hills, I do, an' I am hyer ter be auctioned off ter the galoot what has got the most fun or money in him. Did any one say drink?"

No one did.

All were evidently suspicious of the Honorable Mr. Howlin' Hatchet.

"No one even sighed, hey? Oh! well, gents, ef ye don't can afford ter giv' us a treat, fer sake o' l'arnin' a secret worth millions o' dollars, why I'm thet build I kin go it dry, as long as er Kansas perarie in fly-time. Good-day, gents. When ary one o' ye wants ter spend five thousan' on me fer a shampain supper, I've got ther purtiest little secret ter impart that ye'll find outside o' a Presbyterian primmer. Day-day! I'm goin' ter drink wi' Howlin' Hatchet ther Hilarious High-Horned Hummer, from Humpback!" and "the Hummer" swaggered away toward the Eldorado, with a significant grin upon his ugly visage.

At any other time, his words might have attracted more attention; but just now, the minds of the populace were literally carried away with excitement over the prospective duel.

At the expiration of twenty minutes, the Gent from Gopher promptly appeared upon the plaza with no alteration in his appearance, except that he was, if anything, calmer than before.

No one ventured to question him, for the crowd seemed to stand in awe of him, after witnessing the unceremonious manner in which he had handled the Howling Hatchet.

Ten, fifteen, twenty minutes elapsed.

Then a boy approached the Sport, from the direction of Chambers's cabin, and said:

"Mister, a feller told me to come, and say as how he was called away on important bizness, but would see you later!"

A smile of contempt lit up the Sport's face, as he turned toward the hotel.

"The coward!" was his only comment, and that was inaudible.

CHAPTER XII.

TWO LETTERS.

THE miners and bangers-on of the camp of course were mystified as much as before, and thoroughly disgusted because the duel did not come off, and unanimously voted Joe Chapman a coward.

It did look rather suspicious, this strange absence, considering the fact that he had been the aggressor.

As for First-Class Fred, he sought the Eldorado, and taking a cigar, he sauntered over to Goldie Glenn's table.

"Business is not brisk!" he remarked.

"Not just at present. Won't you sit down?"

"Thank you. I will, for a moment."

And he took a seat facing her.

"I am so glad Mr. Chapman did not return," she said, looking up at him earnestly. "I should have so disliked to see you two gentlemen hurt one another."

"In all probability but one of us would have been hurt," he replied, dryly. "By the way, I see you are interested in Mr. Chapman, as he dubs himself."

"Oh! no—not more than a chance acquaintance. But is not his name Chapman?"

"Not that I am aware of. But then he is the owner of so many *aliases* that it is hard to tell what his true name is."

"Indeed? I took him to be a gentleman, in every sense of the word. Do you know, when I first met him I believed him to be you, who sent me the picture? Then, too, from the way he quizzed me, I felt more assured, as I saw that he suspected me of being who I am."

"Not impossible. Since finding Jackson Chambers here, I have little doubt but what Chapman and he are together in the conspiracy against you."

"Oh! how cruel!"

"Well, I am not prepared to say as to that. Do you know, some one is playing it very fine in this matter, or, eventually, will try to play it fine? Then, too, considering the message of your father, who knows but what, without our knowledge, Chapman and myself may be the very two parties selected for Edna Leeds to choose between?"

"That had not occurred to me. It might be so, however."

"Certainly. Have you the message with you?"

"No. For fear I would lose it, I left it in a

safe place in my tent, which Sam occupies during the day and guards at night."

"Ah! well, it don't matter. What do you think of the new-comer—the circus-girl?"

"I do not know what to think of her, I am sure. It seems so very strange that two of us should happen to meet who bear such a striking resemblance to one another."

"Very true. Yet, not half an hour afterward, Chapman and I—two of the bitterest of foes—encountered. This world is made up of startling events. But the strangest question now agitating my mind is—which young lady is the real Edna Leeds?"

"Why, I am, to be sure!"

"You say so, of course, but pardon me if I attach some little significance to Ma'm'selle Estelle's coming to Brimstone Bar at this particular time."

"Pooh! Allowing that we look alike, in every particular, I fail to see why you should have any reason to believe but what I am the real Edna Leeds. The other girl knows nothing about the case."

"That remains yet to be ascertained."

"Even so, it is not probable that a home-bred girl, who has been absent from home the short time Edna Leeds has, would, in that time, become an expert hat-thrower and circus character."

"I might say the same in regard to flipping the pasteboards!" Fred laughed.

"However, let the comparisons drop. There's a scheme on foot here to counterfeit the real Edna Leeds, but who is at the push-end of it I haven't definitely decided. If you are the real Edna, that other girl has been run in here, to fit into the scheme. If you are not the real Edna, and that other girl is, you are playing a cunning, a bold, and a desperate game, which I shall make it my business to expose and baffle. Do we rightly understand each other now?"

"I believe we do."

Her face was not pale, but rather flushed, while her hand trembled a trifle, as she toyed with the cards.

She did not allow her gaze to meet his as frankly as she had done before, and he hardly knew whether to regard this as a sign of modesty or of guilt.

"I have no hesitancy in asserting my identity if it becomes necessary to distinguish me from this other girl," she continued, after a pause. "Although I have but few of my former effects with me, I could easily have them proven as belonging to the true Edna."

As a couple of men sauntered up just then to try their hands at a game with the Card Queen, Fred arose, and bowed himself out of her presence.

"A woman is an enigma, at best," he muttered, as he left the Eldorado, and walked off toward the post-office. "I admire that girl, yet something seems to tell me that she is not Edna Leeds. However, I did not take a decided fancy to the circus girl. She did not thank me for interfering with the ruffian in her behalf. I wonder where she is?"

He glanced upon the plaza, and saw that lively preparations were being made for the circus. Five or six wagons had been drawn upon the plot and were being unloaded. The main tent was not yet up, but several smaller tents had already been put up, probably for accommodation of the performers and horses.

The venturesome showman had pushed thus far, at great risk, so as to be the first show, and reap the first harvest in the Cœur d'Alene region, when spring should fully open, and the stampede of "gold lunatics" should occur.

Signor Varleri was busy superintending the work, with his coat off, and silk hat crammed back on his head, and he danced about and yelled like a Comanche.

Seeing nothing of Estelle or La Rode anywhere, First-Class Fred continued on toward the post-office. Not that he expected any mail, as it was seldom he received any. His surprise, therefore, was great when, on inquiring, he was handed out two letters—the first he had received since corresponding with Edna Leeds.

One of these was a large envelope, buff-colored, on which was scrawled his name in pale ink.

The other one was a delicate envelope, directed by a pretty, feminine hand. He started as he gazed at the chirography.

It was like to that employed by Edna Leeds in her letters.

"What does this mean?" he muttered. "Can it be—"

He did not pause to finish the sentence, but curbing his curiosity, he opened the larger envelope first.

There was but a scrap of paper within, upon which was scribbled the following:

"FIRST-CLASS FRED:—Beware, lest you get entangled. Quagmires all around you."

"DEADLY DROP."

"Phew! Worse, and more of it!" Fred muttered. "Now, who is this Deadly Drop, and what interest has he got in the matter? By my soul, I've a notion to believe John Leeds's story, and come to the conclusion that the Old Nick really has broken loose. I don't know of a better view to take of it."

He next opened the other missive.

"MR FIRST-CLASS FRED," it began; "you will be surprised to receive this, but, having arrived in Brimstone Bar, I would like to see you privately, in regard to the matters of my father, touching which you sent me a strange document when I was living with Mr. Jackson Chambers, in N—. Call to-night at two A. M."

Very Respectfully,

"EDNA LEEDS."

("Estelle.")

"P. S. Please excuse me, for inviting you at such an unseemly hour, but I do not want Varleri to know of it. La Rode will be with me. He doesn't understand a word of English, you know."

"Or, rather, I don't know a blamed thing about it," First-Class Fred muttered. "The devil is to pay, and where's the funds to come from, figuratively speaking, to pay him with? Ah! I have it! Goldie Glenn is raising 'em, at the card table. Ha! ha! Happy thought! Happy situation, too, I'll be shot if it ain't! Wonder how—which—where—when—blame it—what—oh bosh!"

And entirely out of patience, the Gopher Gent strode away, provoked at himself, and the most bothered man in Brimstone Bar.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE MEETING AT DARK RUN.

ABOUT dusk, that evening, Booth Barron was prowling along Cœur d'Alene trail, near Brimstone Bar, waiting until it was dark enough to venture into the camp without being recognized, when he suddenly found himself face to face with Joe Chapman, the wrestler.

The two appeared to know one another, for they shook hands, familiarly.

"Well, how goes it?" Barron demanded, in his gruff manner. "Things working all right?"

"I can't complain. Now that I've got all the points, I am satisfied I can make a case of it."

"I am not sorry to hear that. I'm in hopes we can raise some greenbacks before long. My wallet is as thin as a wassup's stinger, after a hard winter."

"We, you say?"

"Certainly! Ain't that right?"

Chapman laughed, grimly.

"Well, I should decline negatively!" he declared. "What is to be made I can take care of without the least inconvenience."

"But, look here! What'll I get if you propose to gobble all?"

"Why, you'll get left!"

"I don't believe that you'll play crooked with me, Joe Chapman. You promised to whack up the spoils with me!"

"Nothing more natural, sir. A man will do a great deal nowadays to gain a point, you know."

"Then you did not intend to keep the promise when you made it?"

"I was uncertain about it."

"You are a black-hearted scoundrel, Joe Chapman!" Booth Barron cried hotly.

"Easy—easy!" Chapman returned, with provoking coolness. "I don't mind being called bad names; and besides, you must have been as great a scoundrel as myself, or you would not have associated with me. Now, look here, Barron, you are a murderer, and I have the power to arrest you if I choose. I'd be a fool to share any spoils with you, and I give you a chance to get out of the Bar."

"Curse you, no! I ain't the man to be so cheated—oh, no, not I. I'll stay here, an' if you don't do the fair shake by me, I'll expose your whole game!"

"You will not!"

"And, how will you help yourself?"

"I'll tell you. You see, having worked you for what's in you, I have come to the conclusion that you are in my way, and I must have you out of it. If you will not take the opportunity I have given you, to get out of this part of the country, I'll kill you."

"You'll kill me?"

"That is what I said."

"It will be a cold day when you kill me. I'm every inch as good as you are, as you'll find." Chapman did not reply.

His hands had been in his coat pockets, all along.

Suddenly, as Barron ceased to speak, there was a sudden report, and Barron staggered, and fell.

At the same instant a hand fell upon Chapman's shoulder, and an awed voice cried:

"George Chapman, you too, are a murderer?"

It was Cherry Chambers who spoke.

With a bitter curse, Chapman wrenched himself away, and fled.

That evening, the little camp was literally flooded with handbills, announcing that Mlle. Estelle, would, at midnight, walk a slack-rope, without aid of balance-pole or other artificial means, the rope to be stretched from the top of the roof peak of the Eldorado saloon, at an angle of forty-five degrees, to the plaza, below. Estelle was to light her dangerous path, by carrying a blazing torch in either hand.

The same bills announced that Varleri's great show would be open, the following afternoon, presenting a carnival of wonders.

The evening passed quietly.

There were no fights, and everybody seemed to hold aloof from the usual bacchanal sports, so as to be in proper "fighting trim" for the morrow.

About eight o'clock, it might have been noticeable that a number of the prominent roughs of the camp were absent from their usual haunts, but few of the populace noticed the fact.

An hour later, a group of men were assembled on the Cœur d'Alene trail, at the mouth of Dark Run—a forbidding place, well fitted for the transaction of almost any crime. Towering mountains, arose on either hand, and the Run, which branched off the trail, was a seam penetrating, seemingly, into the bowels of the range.

The men thus congregated were fifteen in number, roughly dressed, and mostly masked—those who were not masked being disguised by clever wigs and false beards.

They appeared to be waiting for new arrivals, and in the course of five minutes five more men, similarly disguised, put in an appearance.

Then, at the motion of one, who appeared to be captain, the gang squatted upon the ground, the leader alone remaining in a standing position.

"Well, boys," he said, glancing over the party, searchingly. "I am pleased to see here present all I have summoned. Though none of you know who I am, I am in a measure acquainted with you all, and am satisfied that you are men who can be trusted, and who are willing to undertake the job we have before us, and push it through, to success, even though we have to go through fire and blood to achieve our end!"

There was an instant murmur of approval, and El Captain went on:

"In me you have one who will lead you without fear, and if we fail, it shall not be my fault. Now, to business. There is a general understanding that one John Raphael Leeds, some years ago cached an immense fortune in gold, in or about the present town of Brimstone Bar. On what is this understanding based?"

"Dunno as fer that," exclaimed one of the men, "cept that a pard o' mine, named Melkton, once found a paper, stating as how John Leeds had that day buried his fortune in gold. It appeared like the leaf o' a memorandum. From Job, the story spread to others, an' ye know a story never loses for the tellin'."

"Was the memorandum anything like this?" the captain asked, and taking from his pocket a document, he read the contents aloud.

It was, word for word, the same message as Goldie Glenn had shown First-Class Fred—the singular tale John Raphael Leeds had left behind, to mystify those who should read it.

"That's about the same thing," the man assented; "anyhow, thar was a gal mixed up in it, and so forth, an' I presume ef Job war alive he'd say this war like what he had."

"Well!" El Captain resumed, "you'll all agree that this is a rather extraordinary document, and possibly is the creation of a disordered brain; but it still is reasonable, to believe, that the buried fortune does exist. The old fellow no doubt struck it rich, and cached it; then, his good fortune and fear commingled, knocked him off his base, and he feared to unearth his treasure, lest he be robbed of it, and wrote this document with an idea of using lunatic strategy as the motif of placing his child in possession of the fortune."

"He must be a smart crazy man!" one of the band observed.

"Of course. There are plenty of instances where men and women are really crazy, and are yet so rational and cunning that their dementia is not discovered for some time. It may be so with Leeds. But, now, before we proceed further, it may be well to perfect our organization. Do you all solemnly swear, by all the sacred ties of earth and Heaven, to follow and obey me, as your ruler and captain, until such time as we shall find John Leeds's buried treasure, performing whatsoever acts your leader shall deem necessary, and clinging to one another like brothers, to the very death? Rise, with uplifted hands, and swear!"

The nineteen men obeyed, and there, in the grim shadows of Dark Ram, the oath was taken.

"The penalty of treachery or deception, in any form, is death!" El Captain announced. "Now, commencing at the right, as you stand, you will be known as Z, Y, X, W, and so on, in rotation, until the nineteenth man is reached, who will be H. You may now sit down."

They did so, when El Captain produced a jug from a clump of bushes, and passed it around. When all hands had taken a formidable swig, he went on:

"Now, be it known to you or not, there are two persons in this town who claim to be Edna Leeds, the daughter of John Leeds, and consequently the heir to his gold. One of these is the female gambler of the Eldorado, Goldie Glenn. The other is the newly-arrived circus girl, Estelle. As you may have noticed, they are perfect counterparts, in point of personal resemblance, and it is hard to tell which is which. I do not know myself, nor am I able to give an opinion in favor of either. It will, I think, be a hard matter to decide which is the genuine, and which is the bogus Edna. Both claim to be the true heir; both are armed with documents similar to that I possess; both claim to have run away from their guardian, one Jackson Chambers, in the East; and old Chambers, who is here after the right one, is puzzled to know which is which. The girl, Glenn, I never met until I came to Brimstone Bar. The circus girl I met several weeks ago, further East, but at that time I knew nothing of the strange documents, nor that she claimed to be other than whom she was represented to be, on the show bills."

"How came these two girls to possess two documents so exactly alike?" Letter H asked.

"That is an enigma, in one sense. It appears, from all I can learn, that the fellow, First-Class Fred, was the person to whom John Leeds assigned the original message, to be transmitted to his daughter in the East. Both girls claim that they received correspondence, and a document, from him. So you see, the matter is as much mixed as ever. It, however, places the Sport in rather a peculiar light, does it not?"

There was a decided grunt of assent from the listeners.

"Now, you remember," El Captain went on, "the clause I read you in the message, where Satan, speaking to Leeds, mentioned that two suitors should be sent, for the choice of the girl. It looks as if First-Class Fred were the one, he being originally intrusted with the message. Does it not stand to reason that, not being certain whether he will be the chosen one of the two, he means to win, hit or miss, and has therefore put forward the second claimant, in hopes of winning through her—whichever the false one may be?"

"You're right," Letter X cried, "it does look decidedly that way. The fellow is a scaly customer, at best."

"Correct! It looks very likely that he knows which girl is which, and intends to play to win, between them. He is, as a consequence, in our way, and the sooner he is got out of it the better it will be to our interests."

"D'ye think he knows where the treasure is?"

"No. But if he is left to roam about loose, he is liable to find it in advance of us."

"You're right. First-Class Fred must die!"

The words were uttered simultaneously by a chorus of rough voices.

"There is another thing to mention," El Captain added, "in connection with the strange message. I have been turning the matter over in my mind, and have about come to the conclusion that the unknown terror, Deadly Drop, who haunts the vicinity of Brimstone Bar, is the same thing or being that the message promises shall guard over Leeds's daughter."

"Not at all impossible," Letter H assumed. "I hope the accursed thing will give us a wide berth."

"Which it will, if we work together and in secret, as we must needs do if we hope to succeed with our plans. One more proposal I have to make: We are now united as a brotherhood and our object is plunder. Should we be discovered we would be branded as outlaws. Why not, then, take advantage of it—take time by the forelock, as it were, and make an honest penny while we are awaiting possession of the fortune? To-morrow evening, between eight and nine, the first stage from Eagle City to Brimstone will come down this trail freighted with *Coeur d'Alene* gold. Shall we permit it to reach Brimstone, or do we need some of the auriferous ourselves? That is the question now before the house."

"I opine we do want some o' that same," Letter I declared.

"And I second the motion," chimed in Letter H.

The others readily accorded their assent, not a man hesitating.

"Then the matter is settled!" El Captain decided. "All hands will meet here to-morrow night at eight o'clock, armed and ready for business. In the mean time, if anything occurs in Brimstone Bar necessitating the rallying of our forces for immediate action, a rocket sent up from the rear of the Eldorado will be the signal. I will now dismiss you and we will all quietly await our chance at John Leeds's fortune. I feel satisfied that something will, ere long, turn up to give us a clew."

The band then broke up the caucus and dispersed.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE MIDNIGHT ROPE-WALK.

BRIMSTONE BAR was up late that night, or at least its people were; for, as the soaring moon cast its brilliant shower of light down upon the wild young town at twelve o'clock, it disclosed the fact that a large crowd thronged the plaza—a mixture of many kinds of folk, such as went to make up the populace.

No need to ask why the commotion.

Estelle, the circus beauty, was to disport herself upon the slack-rope for the edification of the denizens of the camp and as an advertisement for Varleri's Tented Congress of Novelties, which, on the morrow, would be happy to welcome the Bar-ites and their shekels.

The plaza had been somewhat monopolized by the spread of canvas; still there was room for the sight-seers, a large percentage of whom appeared to "feel their oats," so to speak, judging by the noise they made.

Old Howlin' Hatchet was there, full up to the neck, and cutting up so many drunken capers that he was rather an attraction in himself. Twice did he essay to walk up the rope, which was fastened from a stake in the plaza to the roof-peak of the Eldorado, but in each instance did he tumble off and go sprawling to the ground.

"Oo, I ain't no hog—I know when the swill's exhausted!" he lugubriously snorted, after the last attempt. "I kan't walk er rope, ner I can't fling a hat, but I tell ye I can jest git up an' git, and kerry ther biggest secret as ever did exist. I do—I, ther great and only Howlin' Hatchet, o' Cherry-tree, Washington county, Georgia. And, reckomember, gentle galoots, that ther secret is fer sale, ter ther highest bidder. Ah! what—did I heer some one cry ten million dollars? What is he? Show him to me. Ten million an' not a cent less will I listen to, as a starter. Ten I've got! ten I've got! Who says twenty?"

But no "galoot" even breathed "twenty," and so, with a sickly grin, the bullwhacker turned a clumsy handspring, for diversion.

When twelve o'clock came, the multitude began to grow impatient, and anxious for Mademoiselle Estelle to make herself manifest. If they hadn't spent an admission fee to see the show, it had cost a round sum for their indulgence in "rust killer," and they wanted some return for their money.

First-Class Fred stood leaning against a brace of the circus tent, idly engaged in smoking a cigar, and watching the different faces and phases around him. He had come to see Estelle walk the rope. By watching her, he hoped to be able to satisfy himself, whether she was the true Edna Leeds, or the false, a thing he had not yet been able to decide.

The handsome Gent from Gopher was occupied in his cogitations, when he felt a touch upon his arm, and was surprised to see Goldie Glenn standing by his side. She had a fur-dollman flung about her, and a saucy little seal-skin cap upon her head, and looked irrepressibly pretty and captivating.

"Excuse me, pray," she said, smiling, "but I did so want to get a good view of the—the sensation," with a roguish twist of the pretty lips—"and I wanted to ask you if I might consider myself under your protection, for a few minutes."

"Why certainly. I shall be delighted to become your chaperon, Miss Glenn. I was just puzzling my brain with a little enigma!"

"Oh! what is it? I love enigmas."

"You must adore yourself, then—eh? But the enigma I was pondering on—how is the fair Estelle ever going to walk up that rope, without falling off, and breaking her neck?"

"Oh! dear. I hate to think of such things. What if she should fall and break her neck?"

"Why, I should then think there was a chance of her being the real Edna!"

"And if she gained the top in safety?"

"I should not take so many chances on it."

"Then, not wishing her neck any ill luck, I hope she won't be able to perform the feat!" Goldie said, with a pouting laugh. "Ah! here she comes now!"

The crowd parted, and Mademoiselle Estelle was seen approaching, on her way to the rope, carrying two unlighted torches in her hand.

As she was passing where Fred and Goldie were standing, she raised her eyes and flashed the Gopher Gent a quick, pleasant glance, at the same time accompanying it with a graceful inclination of the head.

He doffed his hat, but whether she saw the action or not he could not tell.

Goldie's hand fairly pinching his arm, recalled him to his senses.

"Do you know her? Have you spoken with her?" she demanded in a quick, low, passionate voice.

He tried to conceal a sense of annoyance he felt, as he looked down on her.

"What! you are not jealous of your counterpart, are you?" he replied evasively.

"Yes, I am!" she said impetuously. "But you have not answered my questions."

"Well, to be truthful, I shall have to answer 'no' to both of them," he smiled. "I have not as yet had the honor of an interview with mademoiselle. She has notified me, however, of her presence here."

"Ah! she pretends to know you, then?"

"It would appear so."

Goldie was silent a moment.

"Well, I have told you who I am," she said, after a pause; "and you must be your own judge whether I have been falsifying to you or not. Ah!"

There was a sudden glare of light.

Estelle's torches were ignited, and she had stepped upon the rope with one of the burning brands in either hand, held above her head on either side.

The illy-stretched rope swayed dangerously beneath her feet.

A strange, awed hush pervaded the throng of spectators. Even the boosiest bummer in the assemblage felt constrained to silence until the girl's perilous feat should have been accomplished.

Fred and the Card Queen watched with breathless interest.

Signor Varleri stood at the foot of the rope, as did La Rode, while several others of the circus people were near.

Three steps upon the swaying rope—then Estelle balanced herself upon one foot, and waved the torches at the audience.

Then facing about, she slowly but steadily began the ascent, the swaying rope threatening every instant to precipitate her to the ground.

She retained her equilibrium, however, with graceful ease, and steadily advanced until finally, amid thundering cheers, she stepped from the rope to the solid roof, and throwing down her torches, kissed her hand to the audience.

She then moved along the roof to the scuttle, out of view, but soon reappeared upon the plaza from within the Eldorado.

Here she was greeted with another ovation of applause, and it was with difficulty Varleri could open the passage through the assemblage to her tent.

"What do you think of her?" First Class Fred asked, as he conducted Goldie toward the Eldorado.

"I do not like her," was the quick response. "She is wily, scheming—false!"

"Perhaps! How late does the Eldorado keep open?"

"It will be daybreak ere it closes now."

"Good. I will see you again between now and morning. I will put you to a test to satisfy me which of you two girls is the true Edna Leeds."

"I am ready to meet it now; I may not be at the Eldorado when you come."

"I will run the chances; I prefer to have time for thought. Ah! here we are. *Au revoir!*" And with a courteous bow, he left her at the door.

As he turned away, he fancied he heard a stifled sob, and looked quickly around, but she had disappeared.

CHAPTER XV.

THE TESTS.

FIRST-CLASS FRED was resolved to settle in his mind before he slept that night, the one problem that was agitating him—was Goldie Glenn the real Edna Leeds, or was she a shrewd, wily, accomplished schemer, and an impostor?

It yet lacked an hour and a half, when he turned away from the Eldorado, ere he could see Mademoiselle Estelle, and so he wandered out of the camp and along the Cœur d'Alene trail.

He had no thought or fear of being followed, and therefore guarded his movements with no particular caution.

When he had gone what he believed to be about a mile, he turned and retraced his footsteps, his mind busy with thoughts of Goldie, whom he had grown to regard with a somewhat stronger feeling than mere fancy.

Suddenly, and without any warning, three masked men leaped upon him from behind a bowlder, and attacked him with heavy clubs.

Leaping back, he drew a revolver and fired twice upon them, dropping two of the party instantly; but ere he could fire the third shot the revolver was clubbed from his grasp, and a second blow alongside the head brought him to his knees. Then the assailant dropped the club, and fell upon him, forcing him back to the ground.

Resolved to give him a hard struggle, the sport threw his powerful arms about the fellow's body and drew him into a bear-like hug.

An instant later he was astonished to find that the man did not move a muscle toward continuing the attack.

Rolling him off without any trouble, he proceeded to make an examination, and was electrified to find that blood was oozing from a small bullet-hole in the center of the dead man's forehead.

"The Deadly Drop!" escaped Fred's lips. "I must be a favored one, for, if I mistake not, this is the second time I have been delivered by this unseen avenger."

He arose and looked carefully around him, but even by aid of the brilliant moonlight failed to discover any trace of the mysterious Deadly Drop.

"By the gods! there is something infernally strange about the happenings in and about Brimstone Bar!" he muttered; "and I fancy I won't be sorry when my mission in these parts is ended."

Removing the mask from the face of the dead man, he made the discovery that it was none other than the local desperado, Jack Homer.

A similar examination of the other two assailants resulted in the finding of Bije Buzzard, chief of the Rope and Limb Boys, and another hard-looking character whom Fred did not recognize.

The latter two ruffians were simply badly wounded, but not knowing what else to do, Fred left them lying where they had fallen.

He then continued on his way to Brimstone Bar, and reached the vicinity of Estelle's tent at the appointed hour.

Except across the plaza, in the immediate vicinity of the Eldorado, the camp was wrapped in quiet.

The tent designated by Estelle in her letter contained a dimly-burning light, and as First-Class Fred approached the entrance she stepped forth to meet him.

"Ah! I have been waiting for you, and am so glad you came," she said, putting forth her hands. "Walk in. La Rode is dozing on the cot."

Not without some doubts as to whether he was doing altogether right or not, Fred obeyed, and was given a stool to sit upon, while the fair counterpart of Goldie Glenn occupied a similar seat.

"Do you know, I have feared we would never reach this town, and I have been so anxious, too!" she said. "I did not write you when I left the Chambers place because I did not know whether I could reach you at Eagle City or not. I had no money, and at first did not know how I should get here—but to get here I was bound, after reading papa's strange message. I managed to reach New York, and there saw an advertisement for young ladies to learn the circus business. I applied, was accepted, and by careful and conscientious efforts succeeded so well,

that Mr. Varleri saw me, and offered me a chance to come with his 'snap' show to this wild country. And here I am!"

"I received a note to the effect that you were here," Fred observed. "And, allow me to add that I am somewhat surprised to see you so far advanced in your profession for the short time you have been at it."

"There is little surprising about it when you come to consider that I was placed under an excellent tutor, and then, too, I proved to have an aptitude for the business. What has turned up that is of interest to me since I last heard from you?"

"Oh! very little of importance. Your former guardian, Jackson Chambers, has arrived here in search of you."

"The monster! Oh! mercy, what shall I do? I would not meet him for worlds!"

"You need do nothing. I fancy he will not attempt to molest you."

"I hope not. I loathe and despise him. Is dear, sweet-tempered Cherry with him? She is such a nice girl!"

"His daughter is here. By the way, Miss Leeds, I suppose you have your father's message with you?"

"Oh! yes, indeed! Such a strange, incomprehensible thing it is too," and she drew a document from her pocket and gave it to him.

"Has anything new been learned about my poor demented papa, or the treasure he purports to have buried?"

"Nothing in particular," Fred answered, as he drew nearer the light.

His face was perfectly composed as he closely scrutinized the message.

He at last folded it up, satisfied that it was in every respect a counterpart of the one he had seen in the possession of Goldie Glenn!

"Nothing in particular, except that there are various parties endeavoring to find the treasure, and appropriate it to their own use. There is also another young lady in this camp who claims to be Edna Leeds!"

"What nonsense! You mean the young lady who stood with you to-night?"

"Yes; and she is the very image of you."

"Merely a chance resemblance."

"That may be, but it also happens that she has a document like this and that I sent it to her when she was in the East."

"Indeed! How very strange! Why, I don't know what to make of it. I never expected any one would try to cheat me out of my very name."

"Well, an attempt is being made to cheat one of you two, out of a name. The fact of it is, young lady, one of you two is a most dangerous impostor, and believing that I am one of the two favored ones designated in the message as suitors for the hand of Edna Leeds, I have an interest in detecting which one is the impostor."

"Oh! I'm so glad of that. From what I have seen of you, my confidence is already so great in you that I feel easier, because I know you will have no trouble in proving me to be the genuine Edna."

Never once did the keen, searching gaze of the Gent from Gopher leave the girl's earnest, pretty face, and, skilled student of human nature that he was, he was secretly forced to confess that he was puzzled. For the life of him, he could not have made a positive decision, whether he was facing the genuine or the impostor, so artlessly earnest did this girl seem.

"I shall try to deal fairly!" he declared, rising and buttoning his coat. "After due meditation, I have arrived at two tests—one for you, one for the other girl. As they shall determine I shall work out the exposure."

"Good. I see you are a natural born detective."

"Oh! no. By the way, what do you think of the marriage part of your father's message?"

"Just this: money nor any other consideration, could tempt me to wed a man whom I did not love. I would forfeit a dozen such fortunes, as my father purports to have left, rather than marry his choice for my husband, did I not like him."

"Well, I must say I admire your frankness, and womanly spirit!" Fred confessed, candidly. "I must be going, now. I will see you again, at another time."

"But, your test?"

"I will give you the easiest one, reserving the hardest one for the other rival. Have you the first letter I wrote you?"

"I have not. I destroyed all I received from you, except your photograph, which is in the bottom of my trunk yonder. Do you wish to see it to-night?"

"Oh, no! I will not put you to that trouble. I can see it to-morrow as well. I will now bid you good evening," and with a bow, First class Fred left the tent.

"Oh, heaven!" he mused, as he left her presence, "must I, after all, believe Goldie false, just when I have begun to—"

He shut his lips tightly together, and moved rapidly away. The sky had become overcast, and gloom pervaded the plaza.

Suddenly Fred saw a shadow moving ahead of him, and some impulse caused him to leap forward.

His hand fell upon the shoulder of Goldie Glenn, and he wheeled her around, facing him.

"Goldie!" he ejaculated, reproachfully. "You were listening!"

With a gasp, she attempted to release herself; but he held her firmly.

"Please let me go," she stammered. "I—I—couldn't help it!"

"There, now, don't say a word. I do not blame you. Perhaps you had a right to spy. Goldie, listen: You heard me give her the test. Are you ready to receive yours?"

She was silent a moment, then responded in a choked way:

"Yes."

"Well, don't tremble. It is not hard if you are the true Edna. Have you the first letter I sent you?"

"Yes."

"Once more: What was the name of the post-office at which you received the message?"

"It was at Elkland."

"Thank God!" Fred ejaculated. "Edna, you are Edna, beyond dispute, and I love you. I should have told you this to-night, had your answer been what it might. Here and now, as an honorable man, and regardless of any future developments, I ask you, will you be my wife?"

His arm was about her waist, and he knew that she was trembling violently.

"You surprise me," she said, finally, in a faint voice. "I cannot answer you now. Come to me to-morrow, at nine, and I will give you your answer."

She then released herself, and darted away toward her tent.

CHAPTER XVI.

ARCH PLOTTING.

AFTER leaving the presence of the Gent from Gopher, Goldie Glenn hurried directly toward her own tent, where her servant, Sam, stood faithfully at his post of guard duty. Her cheeks were burning, and her bosom heaved rapidly; but otherwise she betrayed none of the excitement she felt.

"Well, Sam, have you seen any one prowling about since I've been gone?"

"Deed an' I habn't, missy. Eberyting done be quiet about de tent."

"That is good. Keep a vigilant watch until daybreak, Sam." And so saying, the Card Queen passed into her tent, and lit the lantern. Then she sat down, as on the previous nights, and counted up her little store of money, which the cards had won her.

A surprised cry escaped her when she summed all up, for she had exactly ten thousand dollars—the price of her father's ransom.

"Oh! how glad I am!" she murmured. "I had no idea I had so much! Ten thousand dollars! What shall I ever do with it to keep it safe?"

"Be kind enough to hand it over to me, and I will deliver it to the one to whom it belongs!"

Goldie's blood nearly froze in her veins, as she heard the words uttered, as they were, in a deep, sepulchral whisper.

She scarcely dared look up, so great was her terror; but when she gained the courage to do so, she felt somewhat reassured by discovering the ugly bullwhacker, Howling Hatchet, standing near her, with folded arms.

She had expected to see some hideously horned envoy of Satan confronting her.

"Sh! not a word, aloud, at the peril o' yer life!" the Howling Hatchet hissed. "Ye needn't be afeard o' me, fer I'm as harmless as a 'skeeter in winter. I am sent to wait upon ye, for John Leeds's ransom money. I am the agent of the man who holds John Leeds a prisoner. That man's name is Satan!"

Goldie gazed at him, in mute astonishment, not unmingled with disgust.

"You are an impostor and a ruffian!" she fiercely breathed, laying her hand upon the money.

"Don't ye believe it, gal. I have the power to set your father free, or forever lose him to this outer world. Look at me—I am the living representative of the ruler of the infernal re-

gions, and I have come for your money. Shall I have it or not?"

The character of his speech was visibly changed, and his tones, though he spoke but in a whisper, were stern and authoritative.

Goldie's face was pale, but by a great effort she retained her courage.

"You shall not have the money until I have satisfactory proof that my father will be released, and restored to me!" she cried, firmly.

"The proof is forthcoming!" Howling Hatchet replied, advancing to the table, and laying down a piece of paper. "Read that, and satisfy yourself that it is correct."

Goldie did so.

The contents of the paper were as follows:

"BRIMSTONE BAR, April —, 188—.

"Received of Edna Leeds, known as Goldie Glenn, female gambler, the sum of ten thousand dollars, in payment for the release from captivity of her father, John Raphael Leeds."

"(Signed) SATAN, KING OF THE INFERNO."

"Per his authorized Ag't, Howling Hatchet."

"P. S. I hereby testify to the correctness of the above."

JOHN R. LEEDS."

"The last is certainly my father's chirography," Goldie cried, excitedly. "Thank God, then, he still lives!"

"Are you now satisfied?" Howling Hatchet demanded, gruffly.

"Yes! yes! Take the money, and go set my father free. You are more than welcome to it."

"It is well! Preserve this receipt. Lose it under no circumstance or condition or you will regret it!"

So saying, the Howling Hatchet scooped the money from the table into a canvas sack, and disappeared under the back side of the tent, as quietly as he had come, leaving Goldie dazed and bewildered, as she stared at the receipt.

About an hour before the time First-Class Fred visited Estelle's tent, Joe Chapman entered the Eldorado, and took a sharp look around the apartment, as if searching for some one. Not finding the person he wanted, among the noisy *habitués*, he took his departure as unceremoniously as he had entered.

As he left the saloon, a rough-looking customer, evidently a miner, approached and seized him by the arm.

"Sh! not a word!" the man warned. "I am Jackson Chambers, and I want you. Come!"

The detective gave him a doubtful glance, but accompanied him without a word.

They walked rapidly, and were soon in one of the gaps, east of the camp, where the moonlight did not penetrate, but the waters roared.

"Now, then, what do you want?" Chapman demanded, pausing, and evidently not of an inclination to go any further.

"Want!" Chambers repeated, facing him. "I'll tell you what I want: I want to know what in the deuce you are up to?"

Chapman laughed, oddly.

"So you ain't onto the racket, eh?" he said, good-naturedly.

"No, I am not, and if I thought you were playing me false you'd not live an hour."

"Oh! I don't know about that. But, don't fret yourself. I have never once thought of playing you false. I'm working the game in our mutual interests, and you ought to be content to lay by, and look on."

"But, I am not. I want an insight into the matter. Who is this new-comer?"

"Estelle, you mean?"

"Yes."

"Why, she is Edna Leeds, of course."

"Bah! I do not believe it."

"You'd be a fool if you did. Nevertheless, she is Edna Leeds. You understand?"

"Well!"

"Well, I have fitted her out with all requisites, and learnt her her little lesson, and you can bet she is as quick as lightning to catch on. I've sized up the other girl, and have made up my mind we can't do much with her, backed as she is by First-Class Fred. Our only gripe, is through Estelle."

"Who is she?"

"That matters not. When I sent for her, I knew the sort of a bonanza I was laying hold of."

"Likely. What is the difficulty between you and First-Class Fred?"

"That is emphatically none of your business, sir."

"Oh! you needn't bristle up. I know you are brothers, and suppose you've had a row over some love affair. But, as you say, it is none of my business, of course. Go on with what you have to say."

"Well, you see, as I before remarked, our only hope lies in this girl Estelle. She is bold, quick-witted, and capable of facing a cannon, if necessary."

"But how are you going to utilize her?"

"Leave that to me. In the first place, I have posted her on the circumstances of the case, in all particulars up to the present day."

"Secondly, I have armed her, and myself, with an exact copy of the message Leeds sent to his daughter."

"See here! You, then, are El Captain?"

"I am. And, accordingly, you must be Letter—"

"I am Letter H."

"Very well. We now understand each other still better."

"But, hold. How is it I received my notice from another, whom I naturally supposed would be captain?"

"So did I. You refer to Booth Barron!"

"Yes."

"Well, I concluded the fellow was unsafe, and after working him for all there was in him, I concluded I was more fit to head the movement than he."

"Ah! you—"

"Was forced, in self-defense, to kill him."

Jackson Chambers shuddered.

Rank villain though he was, he had never yet stooped to do murder.

"You need not care," Chapman went on.

"It was retribution on him, for killing your son."

"Perhaps. How did you work the matter of the duplicate messages?"

"Easily. I secretly visited the Glenn girl's tent, yesterday, borrowed the message from among her effects, made two exact copies of it, and escaped—all while the nigger slept."

"You are a trump."

"You do me proud," with a dry laugh.

"Now, there are two points we must yet make. First, we must place in Estelle's possession the photo of First-Class Fred."

"Easy enough. I have that. Edna left it behind."

"Good! Next, we must secure the two letters written to her by the sport."

"That will not be so easy."

"I fear not. But, come; let's go back to my quarters. Fred is to have an interview with Estelle, and then she will report to me. There may be news to work on."

"But, look here; I cannot see my way clear yet. In case we succeed in establishing this adventuress as the real Edna, what profit is to be derived from the fact?"

"That remains to be seen. In some manner or other the real Edna must be put out of the way. Estelle shall then be provided with capital to free her pretended father. We will lie in wait, in the background, and as soon as the gold is brought to light we will help ourselves, with Estelle's connivance, and skip!"

"Then why this organized band?"

"A dodge to keep 'em together, and from blundering into our case or upon the *cache*. If worst comes to worst, and they unearth the gold, we stand in for a share of it, you know!"

Chambers stared at the arch villain incredulously.

"I think I see clearly, now," he said, "all but one point: Where's this ten thousand dollars to come from with which old Leeds is to be ransomed?"

Chapman shrugged his shoulders.

"You ought to be retired to the home for incurables!" he returned. "Do you suppose I've been in the detective service for years without now and then collecting little budgets of the 'queer' from 'crooks' who were not anxious for prison honors, as well as some solid collat.? Oh, no! I have some very fine specimens of the art—more than enough, in amount, to straighten out any contingent difficulties. So you see we are all fixed, and if we don't win we ought to go with those of our fraternity whom Justice has given free passage to other parts."

They retraced their footsteps toward Brimstone Bar, both rather congratulating themselves that they held the "bulge" side of the game and were bound to win.

CHAPTER XVII.

CHAMBERS REPENTS.

PROBABLY neither First-Class Fred nor Edna Leeds, otherwise Goldie Glenn, had any idea that their interview on the plaza had been overheard; but such was a fact.

No sooner had they parted than a light figure darted away, and directly entered the larger of the small tents. It was Mademoiselle Estelle.

Her face was flushed with passion, her eyes sparkled dangerously, and her hands were clinched.

"So he loves her, eh, when I tried so hard, and thought I nearly had him in my power!"

she hissed, pacing to and fro. "Oh! how it roused the fire in my heart when I heard him declare his love for her! But, stop! I am not beaten yet. I will not be beaten. He believes her to be the real Edna Leeds. Let him keep on thinking so. What a lucky thing I heard the name of that post-office. Let me think! let me think!"

She paced to and fro like a chained tigress. Her brows were knitted, and her whole being seemed set to the work of concocting some subtle scheme. Her breath came quick and fast, and red spots dotted either cheek like roses.

By and by the cloud cleared from her brow, and she clasped her hands in ecstasy.

"I said I would win, and I will! I have the very plan, and it will succeed. But work must be done."

She put on her hat, and leaving the tent hastened toward that occupied by Chapman. She found the detective and Jackson Chambers in conference.

"Well?" Chapman interrogated, quickly noticing her excited appearance. "What's the word?"

"Good, if used at once. First-Class Fred came to see me, and I played my part well. He gave me a test. He asked me if I had his first letter. I told him no; but stated that I had his picture in my trunk, and would get it for him, if he liked. He said he would not put me to that trouble. He left. On the plaza he met the other woman. She had been spying on him, and he told her so. He then gave her a test, asking her at what post-office she received his letter containing the message. She answered him 'at Elkland,' and he said that was correct, and that he no longer had a doubt but what she was the genuine Edna Leeds. He then told her that he loved her, and asked her to be his wife."

"Aha! And what was the answer?"

"She told him to come to-morrow—that is, I suppose, to-day—at nine o'clock, and she would give him an answer."

Joe Chapman smote the table with his fist, and uttered an oath.

"Yes, curse the luck, and she will accept him. Something must be done."

"You never said a truer thing in your life, Joe Chapman. Something *must* be done, and that, too, right quick."

"And what?"

"Listen and you shall know. I must change places with that girl, or rather, occupy her position!" replied Estelle, decisively.

"Ah!"

"Exactly. Edna Leeds must be taken in custody at once, and smuggled away. I will exchange my effects for hers, and when First-Class Fred comes to the Eldorado, at nine to-morrow, I will be there, dressed in her garments, to receive him. Estelle, the circus girl, will be among the missing!"

"But the circus—how about that?"

"I will leave a confession behind, stating that I, having been playing a bold game, and becoming satisfied that I was the loser, had taken French leave, to escape the penalty of the law."

"Estelle, you are a jewel. But, what about the marriage business?"

"I will accept First-Class Fred's offer on conditions of immediate marriage. You probably have surmised that Fred is the one to whom Edna's marriage will be good luck! Well, when we are married, the old man will reappear, we will get the gold, and the husband and daddy can suck their thumbs, and lament over the untrustworthiness of mankind."

Chapman glanced at Chambers.

"You see clearer now, don't you?" he smiled. "It's a clear case. The first thing is to get the girl. The next thing is, what are we going to do with her. It is too near daybreak to attempt to carry her off."

"Drug her, and take her to my cabin. She will be safe there!" Chambers growled.

"But your daughter—"

"Dare not say her soul's her own when I set my foot down. I'll guarantee for the girl's safety."

"So far, so good. But, now—how about the capture? The negro will first have to be killed or chloroformed, and then the girl quieted."

"I have plenty of chloroform," Estelle said.

"I sometimes inhale it to produce sleep."

"Then get it, while I reconnoiter," Chapman ordered. "Chambers, you remain here."

A visit to Edna's tent resulted in the discovery that the negro Sam was snoring away at a great rate on the outside, and everything being quiet on the inside, seemed to argue that Edna was also asleep.

When the detective got back to the tent, Estelle had also arrived there, with a bottle of chloroform and a sponge.

After a short consultation, the trio crept away toward Edna's tented habitation.

Saturating the sponge, Chapman succeeded in creeping close enough to the negro to hold the sponge near his nose.

When he saw that partial stupefaction had ensued, he clapped the sponge hard down over the black nose, and held it there for fully a minute; then he arose with a chuckle.

"So far, so good!" he mused.

They went around to the back of the tent and listened. Heavy breathing warned that Edna was asleep.

Posting Chambers and Estelle at that point, Chapman returned to the tent entrance, carefully pulled aside the canvas flap, and thus had a view of the interior.

A lantern was dimly burning on the table. Edna lay upon the couch of blankets, that served her as a bed, and her face was turned toward the further side of the tent.

Fastening the sponge by a string to a slender stick, the villain liberally chloroformed it, and creeping into the tent, held the sponge in such a way that Edna must at every breath inhale the pungent odor of the drug.

In less time almost than it takes to tell it she was under the influence of the anesthetic.

"The job's done!" he whispered. "Now, Estelle, we will retire, until you exchange clothing with her. When you are in readiness we will convey her to Chambers's cabin."

They then retired, leaving the one beauty in charge of the other.

In fifteen minutes Estelle notified them that all was in readiness.

Entering the tent they found that the girl had effected an exchange of dresses, and had taken possession of Edna's other apparel and trinkets.

Raising the form of the insensible girl, the two men bore it from the tent, while Estelle remained behind to prepare for the task before her.

On their arrival at the Chambers cabin with their burden, the two villains found it deserted. Laying Edna upon the bed, Chambers quickly struck a light, and was rewarded by finding a note upon the table, written in Cherry's hand.

It was as follows:

"FATHER:—It has come to my knowledge, the villainous work you are engaged in. I am shocked and mortified beyond expression. I cannot remain here to share the degradation and dishonor that must inevitably result from your badness. Booth Barron was not killed—only stunned—by the bullet of your confederate, Joe Chapman, and he has told me all. He has promised to lead a better life, if I marry him, and, murderer though he is, I am going to do it, and redeem him from the fallen life. Good-by; and that you may turn aside from the path of wickedness is the wish of your daughter

"CHERRY."

Jackson Chambers's hand trembled, and he was visibly affected by the note.

"This is tough," he said, hoarsely. "You can go, Chapman; I want to be alone. I'll attend to her—" with a nod toward the bed.

"All right," answered Chapman as he took his departure.

When he was gone, Chambers spread the note out on the table, and sat staring blankly at it, as though bereft of his senses.

At last, he arose with a deep sigh, and went over to the bedside, where Edna lay. His features softened as he gazed down at her.

Procuring a basin of water, he bathed her forehead, and poured a few drops of water between her parched lips.

Chancing to glance toward the window, he saw a human face pressed against the pane—a wild-looking, hairy face, with deep burning eyes.

Uttering a yell, half of rage, half of horror, he sprung to the door, and out into the early gloaming; but when he got outside the man of the wild face was nowhere in sight!

Chambers did not search for him. He staggered back to the doorstep, and sitting down, bowed his head in his hands. When he arose, it was sun-up, and people were bustling about on the other side of the plaza.

Opening the door, he entered the cabin carefully, but there was no need for caution, for Edna was sitting up on the bed, staring wonderingly about.

She uttered a startled cry, at sight of him.

"Don't!" he said, deprecatingly. "I wish to talk to you, and you to listen. Will you?"

"Proceed," she said, coldly. "I suppose I am your prisoner?"

"You were, but I confess, now, and proudly too, that I am a conscience-stricken man. I have been plotting and scheming against you,

until I have lost my own child, and now, alas, when it is too late I am repentant!"

He went on, earnestly and deliberately, and made a clean breast of it, explaining to Edna all which is already known to the reader, but of much of which she was ignorant. He told of the latest and boldest scheme of all, and its probable result, if there was no intervention.

Edna listened attentively, and became satisfied of his honest intentions; then, they spent some time in arranging plans, to baffle Chapman and his adventuress-accomplice.

CHAPTER XVIII.

CONCLUSION.

THE clouds of the latter part of the night cleared away, and the day dawned bright and warm. The people were up and stirring early, for this was "circus-day," and not to be missed, for a mint of money.

When Varleri went to Estelle's tent, and found a note there, stating that she had "skipped," he raved, swore and tore his hair; but when he became more rational, he decided to announce as soon as his afternoon audience should be seated, that Mlle. Estelle had suddenly been taken very ill and could not appear.

Happily, he had several other good performers with him.

First-Class Fred was up and about, bright and early, and looked as dashing and handsome as ever, and was in unusual good spirits, for he felt sure that the arrival of nine o'clock would secure him a favorable answer from Edna.

After breakfast, he lit a cigar walked down to the post-office, and asked for his mail.

A buff-colored envelope was handed him.

"From Deadly Drop!" he muttered glancing at the rambling superscription.

He tore away the envelope and glanced over the contents of the note.

This was what was written:

"FIRST CLASS FRED:—Go ahead!"

"DEADLY DROP."

That was all.

"Well, I'll be banged," was the sport's muttered ejaculation. "That beats the cats. It would seem that the fellow knows more about my own business than I do."

He pondered over the strange advice for some time, but the more he pondered the less satisfaction he got, so he finally tore the letter into shreds.

As soon as the hour of nine arrived he repaired to the Eldorado and found Edna, as he supposed, seated at her table as usual.

She smiled him welcome as he approached and motioned to him to be seated.

"I have been expecting you," she said, dropping her gaze, "and—and I wish to thank you for making me so very, very happy last evening."

"Then am I to be made happy in return?"

"I—I don't know. I will marry you, on conditions."

"On conditions?" he echoed.

"Yes," laughingly. "You put to test my identity, last night, and I will test your professed love, now. Marry me here, in this room, and at once, and I will become your wife, and quit the Eldorado forever."

Something like a chill passed through Fred's veins, and he gazed at her, in surprise.

"And why here?" he asked.

"For the simple reason that I wish it so. I will be leaving an undesirable life, then, for one that is desirable."

"Very well. It shall be as you wish. Where will I find some one to marry us?"

"Over yonder is a lawyer, Mr. Lewis. He has the legal right to perform the ceremony. You can speak with him, and I will return, in five minutes."

Fred secured the services of the lawyer, but in spite of his caution it leaked out that the marriage was to take place, and the room rapidly filled with an eager, excited crowd.

Estelle soon reappeared, and as the crowd was by this time dense, it was necessary for Fred, and her, and the lawyer, to stand upon chairs.

The lawyer had barely begun the preliminaries of the marriage, when there was a cry:

"Stop! stop! Make way! This marriage must not take place!"

And a moment later Jackson Chambers and Edna stood before the lawyer.

"First-Class Fred," the ex-broker cried, "that woman by your side is not Edna Leeds, nor is she the Goldie Glenn known to this place! She is Estelle, the circus girl. An infamous swindle has been imposed upon you. I was a party to it, but repented before it was too late, and am here to save you. Here is Goldie Glenn, other-

wise the real Edna Leeds. She was drugged and kidnapped last night, and yonder impostor was substituted in her place. I swear it, by high Heaven!"

Dazed and bewildered, Fred stood staring at the speaker, while Estelle uttered a piercing shriek and fell back in a swoon.

Before another word could be uttered by Chambers, the form of Joe Chapman arose above the crowd, across the room, and either hand clutched a revolver.

"The game is up, Fred Freeman!" he cried, "but you shall not triumph. For you the fourth of May has come, curses upon you!"

His weapons came up with two clicks, and in an instant more the Gent from Gopher would have received their contents, but Chapman did not fire.

His hands dropped to his side as quickly as they had been raised, and a tiny red spot appeared in the center of his forehead, as he staggered and fell backward among the crowd.

"The Deadly Drop!" resounded the cry.

"Clear the room of this crowd!" commanded Fred, in stentorian tones. "The marriage will not take place at present!"

What remains to be told can be briefly summed up.

When the crowd was thinned out and order restored, the Gent from Gopher ordered the body of Chapman to be removed to his tent, and Estelle was placed in charge of the circus manager, Varleri.

Fred and Edna then accompanied Jackson Chambers back to his cabin, where a long consultation and a series of explanations was held.

For Chambers's personal safety, it was deemed best that he get quietly out of the town, and believing him sincerely repentant, Fred and Edna both freely forgave him, and he took his departure.

Not knowing what perils might beset them, Fred and Edna also took their departure by the noon stage, going to the next eastern town, where they stepped off, expecting to hear from the mysterious Deadly Drop.

They were not disappointed.

By the first mail they were the recipients of the following:

"LAST MESSAGE OF JOHN LEEDS.

"FREDERICK FREEMAN, }
"EDNA LEEDS. }

"By these presents do you know that this is the last you will ever hear of John R. Leeds.

"Years ago he came to these parts, struck it rich, beyond his most sanguine expectation, and over his good fortune became a lunatic. At times he was violent, and again cunningly rational; but always insane. He was possessed of a strange belief that he was in the power of the devil, and penned a singular document, with which you are well acquainted. It appears he intrusted this to you, First-class Fred, and it has ever since been his desire that, were you an honorable man, you should wed his daughter. I having been his companion and attendant, through sympathy, know whereof I speak.

"He was never at rest, and even I could not control his actions. He was in all respects a wonderful man. I grew to respect him. But he was wily, cunning and agile. He was here one minute—there another. He had the quickest faculty of making himself invisible of any man I ever knew. He has watched the plotting and scheming in regard to his daughter with interest—rational interest, I might say, and has known and overheard nearly every plan and plot. He has been within a few feet of you, unknown to you. With his marvelous air-gun and his skill as a marksman, he has played his role of the Deadly Drop whenever in a humor for that sort of work.

"I scarcely need recount all of those who have fallen by his aim. He was in the Eldorado when he killed Chapman.

"Had he not, in some manner unknown to me, become convinced that Chambers was to stop the marriage, he would have killed Estelle. I never knew where his gold was until to-day. When he came back from Brimstone Bar, he lay down with his head in my lap, and breathed his last. Before he died he gave me directions to give to you. The gold is buried twenty miles east of the Bar, at the side of a fall in a little stream called the Sentinel. The inclosed map will direct you to the spot.

"At his dying request I have laid him tenderly away at rest, and though you and I may never meet, I shall, as long as I live, ever keep green the grave of the wonderful man to whom I was as faithful as a brother.

"Yours very truly,

"J. B. McCLANE,
"The Howlin' Hatchet from Cherry-tree."

The gold was found, just as stated, and transferred to a place of safety, where it will keep the husband and wife, Fred and Edna, in luxury during the remainder of their lives.

Thus ends one of the strangest romances consequent upon the opening up of the wonderful Coeur d'Alene mining-country.

THE END.

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